THE HAND OF THOUGHT: 
A CROSS-TRADITION EXAMINATION OF 
KOSHO UCHIYAMA AND MARTIN HEIDEGGER 

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents how the Sōtō Zen priest, Kōshō Uchiyama, and the mercurial and polarizing German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, approach what the former calls “opening the hand of thought” (ōomo no te banashi). For Uchiyama, the metaphoric opening of our mental hand requires the meditative practice of zazen or “just sitting” (shikantaza) and is said to mean that we avoid the act of thinking. Conversely, Heidegger maintains that the “releasement” (Gelassenheit) of our conceptual grasp is the basis of a more essential and “meditative” mode of thinking and discourse (besinnliches Denken). While Uchiyama and Heidegger appear to be at odds, their approaches are in fact compatible. By engaging in a cross-tradition examination of these two thinkers, I provide an original contribution about how both Uchiyama and Heidegger view opening the hand of thought as the critical step toward a more attuned and compassionate mode of thinking and discourse.

Keywords: discourse, Gelassenheit, Heidegger, thought, Uichyama, Zen Buddhism

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the estranging and seemingly out of place nature of Martin Heidegger’s perspective in the Western philosophical tradition. It is then not surprising that Heidegger’s work has been and continues to be considered alongside Eastern thinkers and philosophies. The present paper continues this trend by undertaking a cross-tradition examination of how the Sōtō Zen priest, Kōshō Uchiyama, and the mercurial and polarizing German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, approach what the former calls “opening the hand of thought” (ōomo no te banashi).

Born in Tokyo in 1912, Kōshō Uchiyama earned a master’s degree in Western philosophy from Waseda University in 1937. Twenty years after becoming a Sōtō Zen priest, in 1965, Uchiyama became the abbot of Antaiji—a temple and monastery affiliated with the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism located outside Kyōto (202). Uchiyama authored over twenty books on Zen and although he never travelled outside
of Japan, his influential text first published in English in 1993 called *Opening the Hand of Thought* has served as an engaging introduction to the foundational features of Zen Buddhist practice and meditation for countless readers around the globe (202).

For Uchiyama, the metaphoric opening of our mental hand is embodied by the meditative practice of zazen, which is also referred to using Eihei Dōgen Zenji’s expression for zazen, “just sitting” (*shikantaza*). According to Uchiyama, zazen requires letting go of our conceptual grasp such that we are said to be neither asleep nor thinking, but fully present with the reality of things (2004, 28-29). Like Uchiyama, opening our mental hand for Heidegger is a corrective response to Western thought’s dogmatic focus on the conceptual grasp. However, Heidegger takes the “releasement” (*Gelassenheit*) of our conceptual grasp to be the basis of a more essential and “meditative” mode of thinking and discourse (*besinnliches Denken*).

Heidegger is also distinct from Uchiyama in that he mistakenly limits the ability to open the hand of thought and the mode of thinking and discourse that it produces along ethno-nationalist lines. While at first glance Uchiyama and Heidegger appear to be at odds, their approaches to the hand of thought are in fact compatible. This cross-tradition examination of these two thinkers substantively demonstrates how both Uchiyama and Heidegger view opening the hand of thought as the critical step toward a more attuned and compassionate mode of thinking and discourse.

2. UCHIYAMA AND THE CONCEPTUAL GRASP

At the core of Uchiyama’s *Opening the Hand of Thought* is the desire to present the reader with what it means to engage in the meditative practice of zazen. For Uchiyama, zazen is the embodiment of “opening the hand of thought” (*omoi no te banashi*). This is to say that the “mental posture” during zazen requires that our mental hand be wide open (192). I will unpack what exactly Uchiyama means by such an open mental posture shortly, but first it is important to clarify a key point related to opening the hand of thought, zazen, and Zen philosophy.

The reason for the clarification has to do with the fact that Zen Buddhism does not appear *ex nihilo*, but like most Buddhist schools of thought it is part of a deep and complex lineage. For instance, it is common knowledge that “Zen Buddhism” is derived from “Chan Buddhism,” a school of thought that developed in China and spread to Japan under the name “Zen,” as “Zen” is equivalent to the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word “Chan.” Furthermore, Chan or Zen can be understood as a school or branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Loy 1997, 42). Therefore, it is incorrect to take Uchiyama’s connection between opening the hand of thought and zazen as being unique to a Zen philosophy.

Although it is true that the term “zazen” is most readily affiliated with Zen Buddhism, the term “zazen” broadly construed merely refers to the act of meditation and meditation is a central activity for a variety of Buddhist traditions and philosophies. Similarly, while the phrase “opening the hand of thought” is associated with zazen in Uchiyama’s text, this association needs to be interpreted to mean that the function of meditative practice in a general sense is to open the hand of thought. In other words,
opening the hand of thought is the meditative practice of not grasping and clinging to
thought, and the meditative practice of not grasping and clinging to thought is not
unique to Zen Buddhism since it is a central feature of a variety of Buddhist traditions
and philosophies and more generally, a variety of “Eastern” 1 philosophies and
traditions as well.

Uchiyama’s emphasis on zazen, which again is simply the meditative practice of
not grasping and clinging to thought and metaphorically labeled “opening the hand of
thought,” diverges greatly from the Western emphasis on the conceptual grasp. Early
in Uchiyama’s text he writes:

I use the expression “opening the hand of thought” to explain as graphically as possible the
connection between human beings and the process of thinking. I am using “thinking” in a
broad sense, including emotions, preferences, and all sense perceptions, as well as
conceptual thoughts. Thinking means to be grasping or holding on to something with our
brain’s conceptual “fist.” (2004, 28)

From the above passage it is easy to read Uchiyama as concluding that the act of
thinking is inextricably linked to the act of grasping. However, I maintain that
Uchiyama needs to be read as describing the Western characterization of what it means
to think.

If we adhere to the classical outlook ascribed to Western scholarship and
philosophy that Uchiyama identifies as “beginning with the early Greeks” (2004, 31),
the assumption is that the tighter we close the hand of thought, the greater our
knowledge about things becomes. This classically Western attitude towards the hand
of thought is epitomized in Cicero’s description of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of
Citium, closing his open hand into a tightly bound fist:

When he held out his hand with open fingers, he would say, “This is what a presentation is
like.” Then when he had closed his fingers a bit, he said, “Assent is like this.” And when
he had compressed it completely and made a fist, he said that this was grasping (and on the
basis of this comparison he even gave it the name ‘katalepsis’ [grasp], which had not
previously existed). But when he put his left hand over it and compressed it tightly and
powerfully, he said that knowledge was this sort of thing and that no one except the wise
man possessed it. (quoted in Inwood & Gerson 2008, 47)

Against the mindset reflected in the above passage, Uchiyama presents us with two
curious insights. First, being caught in and consumed with the act of thinking as
grasping means that we are consumed with what is “accidentally real” and are no nearer
to what is “undeniably real” or as expressed in the Lotus Sutra, “all things as they really
are” (shohō jissō) (2004, 195). Second, what is undeniably real is beyond the reach of
the conceptual grasp. Let us consider these two insights more deeply.

1 It is important to express that within the blanket term of “Eastern philosophy” we find extremely diverse,
nuanced, convergent, and divergent schools of thought that typically originate from places like India,
China, and Japan. See Ma (2008, 6).
For Uchiyama, the issue with emphasizing the conceptual grasp is that things, the world, the self are reductively framed in terms of their relations and definitions (31). From Uchiyama’s perspective such reductive framing establishes the erroneous outlook that the self-identity or the substance of a thing has been disclosed. For instance, when we perceive something like a fire and its qualities to burn or to produce heat, we often ontologically reduce the self-nature or self-identity of fire down to these tangible surface presences. This reduction overlooks that there is more to the reality or self-nature of fire (Nishitani 1983, 117-118).

To use Uchiyama’s example, if we were sitting at a table looking at a cup, we might believe that we are experiencing the cup in the exact same way or in a manner that is exhaustive. While there might be some similarities in our experience, the accidental fact of the matter is that we each bring our own embodied positionality to how we experience the cup. Therefore, as Uchiyama states, “There’s no ground for our saying that a fact we know or an idea we embrace is absolute” (2004, 9). Moreover, Uchiyama asserts that since our thoughts or what we conceptually grasp hold of about fire, a cup, and so forth are accidental and not absolute or undeniable, then our thoughts about things are nothing to hold onto or to be consumed with (11). However, this begs the question: what constitutes this undeniable or absolute reality?

To answer the question raised above let us first consider what Uchiyama means by “accidentally real.” Simply stated for Uchiyama, what is accidentally real are our conceptions about things i.e. our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, linguistic expressions. In this sense, what is accidentally real is not an actual reality, but a false sense of reality that is the byproduct of viewing the conceptual grasp as having an exhaustive reach or a capacity to exhaustively possess things. Although these conceptions are meaningful, they only offer us a surface presence and a surface-level encounter.

Alternatively, encountering what is “undeniably” or “absolutely real” means encountering things, the world, each other, and our own selves as they freely and really are in their full presence, in their full self-natures. As Uchiyama writes, “Things being just as they are is also known as the suchness of things (tathatā in Sanskrit)” (12). For Uchiyama, bringing ourselves into alignment with the undeniable reality of things where things are fully free, and thus present to be what they are requires that we open the hand of thought and let go of our conceptions.

When we let go of our conceptions, there is no other possible reality than what is right now; in that sense, what is right now and here is absolute, it’s undeniable. Not only that, this undeniable reality is at the same time the reality of life that is fundamentally connected to everything in the universe. This is undeniable reality. The truth to be derived from this is that right now is all-important. Dwelling here and now in this reality, letting go of all accidental things that arise in our minds, is what I mean by “opening the hand of thought.” (12)

The experience described above is not unlike standing at a scenic vista to behold a beautiful sunset and rather than reaching for our smartphone to photographically grasp hold of the moment, we just stand quietly and allow ourselves to be fully present in the
presence of the sunset. This act of letting go to be fully present is the embodiment of opening the hand of thought, which is to say the embodiment of the meditative practice of not grasping or clinging to thought that Uchiyama refers to with the term “zazen.”

3. SITTING ZAZEN

Uchiyama illustrates the difference between what occurs during zazen or meditative practice and the Western emphasis on thinking as grasping by using the comparison of the renowned statue The Thinker by Rodin. With The Thinker we are witness to the posture of thinking, which is “a posture of chasing after illusions”—hunched over, shoulders drawn forward, and chest compressed (45-54). Conversely, the posture of zazen means that our body is straight with trunk, back, neck, and head all in alignment. With the posture of zazen, we are said to alleviate congestion and are free from pursuing “fantasies” and “delusion” (45). However, Uchiyama cautions that opening the hand of thought does not solely mean that we take up the position or posture of zazen. According to Uchiyama, “When we actually do zazen, we should be neither sleeping nor caught up in our own thoughts” (47). Thus, the actual practice of zazen and in turn the practice of opening the hand of thought appear to mean that we are not engaged in the act of thinking and are actively letting go of our thoughts.

To be clear, opening the hand for Uchiyama does not mean that we are free from the occurrence of thoughts. Uchiyama draws a distinction between the pursuit of thoughts or the act of thinking and “ideas or thoughts merely occurring” (49). When practicing zazen if a thought arises and we pursue the thought, then we are no longer sitting zazen and the hand of thought bends back and shuts. It is the case that pursuing the thought takes us back into the realm of thinking/grasping. On this point Uchiyama supportively asserts, “Thinking of something means grasping that something with thought” (50). However, if we are sitting zazen and a thought emerges but we let go of it and do not grasp after it, then the hand of thought remains open and we maintain a true and compassionate alignment with what is undeniably real, “the ungraspability of things” (50, 12). As Uchiyama writes, “It is the reality of that which cannot be grasped, the reality about that which nothing can be said. This very ungraspability is what is absolutely real about things” (12). Again, this “ungraspability” is the very self-nature of a thing, a thing free from the conceptual grasp and fully present as it is.

Uchiyama’s emphasis on the ungraspability of things brings to mind Heidegger’s emphasis on the truth of things or as he writes in What is Metaphysics? … “the truth of Being” (1949, 358). It is no secret that Heidegger advances a Janus-faced notion of truth as a-lêtheia (ἀλήθεια). Truth as a-lêtheia is a complex interplay of tangible “unconcealment” or “disclosure” (alêtheia) and at the same time a preservation of truth’s strange darkness and density, its hidden reserve and refusal (Bruns 1989, xv). It holds that to seek the truth of being that inheres in any one thing cannot amount to grasping hold of surface presence or assuming that there is nothing more to things than what has been grasped.

Truth as a-lêtheia summons what Heidegger calls in What is Metaphysics? “the Nothing” (Das Nichts) or as John A. Walsh employs “The No-Thingness” (1949, 331;
The No-Thingness of things means that like an iceberg, to relate solely to what is actual or actually present at the surface of things is to disregard the No-thingness of things, their abyssal side wherein the unfathomable or “ungraspable” truth of a thing’s being always lies withdrawn, always veiled or hidden. As Heraclitus famously offers, “Phūsis loves to hide” \([\text{phūsis krūptesthai philei}]\) (Fr. 123/ Bruns 1989, 40). For Uchiyama, and as will be shown to be true for Heidegger, opening the hand of thought allows things to be in their withdrawal or to be present in their ungraspability, as opposed to closing the hand of thought where a thing becomes the “object” of reductive conceptual conquest.

Although this paper will ultimately demonstrate the compatibility between Uchiyama and Heidegger, a cursory reading of Uchiyama seems to result in the idea that the act of thinking is incompatible with opening our mental hand to be present with the ungraspability of things. As Uchiyama posits:

Therefore, the Middle Way in Buddhism does not mean taking some in-between position that has been conjured up in our heads, nor acting in a compromising way. Rather, despite the fact that we latch on to our ideas of being or nonbeing, taking the Middle Way means to demolish all concepts set up in our minds and, without fixing on reality as any particular thing, to open the hand of thought, allowing life to be life. (2004, 101-102)

The sentiment that we need to “demolish all concepts” to some only hardens the hasty conclusion that for Uchiyama thinking is incompatible with opening the hand of thought. Again, reaching such a conclusion is incorrect, but for now let us leave Uchiyama and pivot fully to Heidegger’s approach to the hand of thought.

4. HEIDEGGER AND THE CONCEPTUAL GRASP

To begin to understand what it means to open the hand of thought with Heidegger it is first necessary to establish Heidegger’s own issue with how Western thought has lionized our conceptual grasp. In Being and Time (Sein und Zeit) Heidegger advances that in the frame-by-frame moments of our perceptual experiences we do not, as Edmund Husserl argues, actively attend to things. Instead, we are said to predominantly take things for granted, and with this lack of interest, things are consigned to a background state of “readiness-to-hand” (Zuhandenheit). In this way readiness-to-hand can be viewed as the consequence of reifying what we conceptually grasp. Here we have what Heidegger in Being and Time calls the “as-structure” (Als-Struktur) (2010, 144 [149]). This is to say that once we have referentially grasped something “as” having certain qualities or as having a certain function, then the bloom is off the rose since there appears to be nothing more to a thing than what we have grasped it as. It follows that as long as things are grasped and in turn familiar and readily “…at our disposal”

\[2\] For Heidegger the word “thing” (Ding) positively denotes the ungraspable thing free of the artificial reconstruction, oversimplification, and subjugation, which are all negatively attributed to the “object” (Gegendentstand) ( [1971] 2001, 165).
(69 [69]), then they are destined to be taken for granted and to recede into a background of readiness-to-hand.

It is safe to say that all manner of things are conceptually grasped and in turn consigned to the background of readiness-to-hand. A lack of appreciation for what is at-hand can afflict everything from the gadget that is no longer shiny and new to the once brightly burning relationship between two people that now faintly flickers. Yet, Heidegger draws a red line when it comes to the question concerning the meaning of “Being” (Sein). The question of Being is for Heidegger the most fundamental question we can inquire into since as he expresses in his later thought, it is the very veiled or withdrawn depth of Being that provokes us or calls into thinking in the first place ([1954] 2004, 17). It is well-known that Being and Time begins with what Heidegger views as Western thought’s forgetfulness towards the question concerning the meaning of Being (2010, 1-2 [2-4]). This attitude of forgetfulness can be interpreted as the result of how Being has been consigned to a state of readiness-to-hand. In other words, this lack of interest in Being is not an issue of the question’s immensity, but because Western thought believes it has sufficiently grasped the question, and thus answered everything having to do with Being.

The idea that the question of Being can been consigned to a state of readiness-to-hand is for Heidegger unconscionable and seems to demark a concerning turn in society. Over the pages of Being and Time Heidegger presents Dasein as having been occluded from a more “authentic” (eigentlich) way of “Being-with” (Mitsein). The obstruction to this more authentic way of being-with can be interpreted as being a byproduct of a myopic focus on what has been conceptually grasped, which Heidegger negatively attributes to the public sphere or “publicness” (Öffentlichkeit). This vilification of the public sphere is most palpably felt in a quote from his Black Notebooks when he writes, “The more public the public sphere, the more closed the openness of being” (quoted in Knowles 2019, 16). As Heidegger sees it, publicness only leads to our getting caught up in the conceptual grasp, which expresses itself in the detrimental tendencies of “the they” (das Man)—“idle -chatter” (Gerede), “curiosity” (Neugier), and “ambiguity” (Zweideutigkeit), and ultimately results in a closed off or “inauthentic” (uneigentlich) way of being-with (2010, 111 [114], 161-173 [§35-180]). Now, while the issue with the conceptual grasp is addressed in Being and Time, it is not until Heidegger’s later thought that the issue is fully unpacked.

5. THE LOGOS AND MOVING-INTO-NEARNESS

In Heidegger’s essay titled “Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking” the dialogue between a teacher, a scientist, and a scholar describes the aim of thinking as a “moving-into-nearness” (In-die-Nähe-gehen) (1966, 89). The natural assumption is that moving nearer to things is simply a matter of reducing distance by grasping hold of them, whether the gap here is a physical distance or one of knowledge about a thing. To the latter point, when things around us are unfamiliar or unknown they seem unsettlingly distant. Yet, in Heidegger’s essay, “The Thing” Heidegger cautions that nearness does not come about from “the reduction of the longest distances…” ([1971]
Alternatively, nearness is something that we cannot encounter directly but only “by attending to what is near” (164). For Heidegger, the readily available but flawed notion that nearness is achieved with the conceptual grasp is deemed to be rooted in a misconception about the “essential nature” of what we have come to call thinking ([1954] 2004).

One of Heidegger’s most concentrated inquiries into the nature of thought arises in a series of lectures delivered during the winter and summer semesters of 1951 and 1952 at Freiburg University. Heidegger describes these lectures that are published in What is Called Thinking? (Was Heisst Denken?) as an effort to “learn thinking” (4). This does not mean that we need to learn how to think, but, rather, learn how to correct the misconception about the essential nature of thinking to see that nearness is only achieved when we open the hand of thought. However, if we examine Heidegger’s outlook more closely, this misconception about moving-into-nearness is rooted in a deeper misconception about the logos.

The logos (λόγος) is a widely definable concept but is generally construed as both the structure or order that things have as well as the system of thought and language by which we seek to understand the structure or order of things. Since human beings have been traditionally viewed as blessed with speech or as Aristotle suggests zoon logon echon, “The human being is the animal who has speech” (Crosswhite 2013, 121), our use of the logos has been equated with our statements about the world. It follows that our statements are not observed as mere assertions about the world but are taken to be critically important. The criticality of our stating is reflected in Plato’s concept of psychagōgia, which is the notion that the logos has the power to lead the soul (28). This “power” is ostensible the result of how our statements are vitally rooted in everything we do. Thus, our statements about the world or things are imbued with the power to move-us-into-nearness, which is to say that our stating is the basis of a higher form of intelligence that leads to a more intimate and thoughtful encounter with things. While Heidegger fully details his uneasiness with this conception of the logos at the end of his academic career in the lectures that comprise What is Called Thinking?, his disquiet is visible early on in his academic life during his “Grundbegriffe der Aristotelischen Philosophie” (“Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy”) lectures.

In the Grundbegriffe lectures delivered in the summer and winter semesters of 1924 at the University of Marburg, Heidegger reads Aristotle as presenting two options for the logos, “a logos of judgment” and “a logos of understanding” (Heidegger 2009, 75; Bambach 2013, 120). The difference between a logos of understanding and a logos of judgment is that the latter would entail that we could bracket-off our everyday concerns from impinging on our process of thinking about things. Such a bracketing-off would mean that our statements about the world as well as about truth and falsity would be grounded in some form of authority or to use Uchiyama’s words, grounded in absoluteness or undeniability. Ultimately though, Heidegger reads Aristotle as not locating the logos in the sterile ground of objective judgment but in the complex and vernacular ground of everyday understanding. In Being and Time Heidegger describes the everyday nature of the logos as the “hermeneutics of the λόγος” (2010, 24 [25]).
For the *logos* to be hermeneutical, to be a *logos* of understanding means that our stating does not intrinsically lead to grounded judgments about things. Rather it is the case that our stating produces interpretations, and thus in agreement with Uchiyama our statements are of the realm of what is accidentally real and not of the realm of what is absolutely or undeniably real. Therefore, while these interpretations or understandings are meaningful with respect to our being-in-the-world and “being-between-worlds” (Ortega 2016, 49-59), the grasp on things that our statements secure is subjectively distorted. Additionally, the hermeneutical character of our stating means that solely emphasizing what we state about things does not move-us-into-nearness with them. This issue with reifying our stating is a point that Heidegger emphatically bolsters in the *Sophist* lectures delivered at the University of Marburg after the *Grundbegriffe*.

In the *Sophist* lectures Heidegger asserts that, “According to its original sense and according to its original facticity as well, λόγος is not disclosive at all but, to speak in an extreme way, is precisely concealing” (2003, 136). Heidegger continues, “λόγος is at first mere prattle. The domination of idle talk precisely closes off being for the Dasein and brings about a blindness with regard to what is disclosed and what might be disclosive” (136). Heidegger’s dismissal of the *logos* here is a dismissal of Plato’s dialectic specifically and a more general dismissal of the idea that dialectic is “…something like a higher level of what is known as thinking” (137). No matter if it is Plato’s dialectic or that of Hegel (Gonzalez 2002, 383), Heidegger rejects the Western emphasis on dialectic as a higher level of thought, and in *Being and Time* Heidegger goes so far as to characterize dialectic as a “genuine philosophical embarrassment” (2010, 24 [25]). Again, Heidegger’s rejection of dialectic is a rejection of the dominant but flawed outlook that takes our stating alone to be the path towards a higher mode of thinking that facilitates a more intimate and thoughtful encounter with things.

These early musings on the *logos* aside, it is not until the end of Heidegger’s academic career that he fully teases out the problem with the misconception about the *logos*. In *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger characterizes the misconception as a proccupation with “saying” or “stating” over and above what he calls the “laying.” According to Heidegger, to engage the *logos* so as to engage in its verb form *legein*, means that we don’t simply commit to saying or stating, but in the original Greek sense we also must embody a “laying” ([1954] 2004, 198-199). The laying can be understood as “listening” (*hören auf*) since the act of listening allows things to “lie-before-us” and as Krista Ratcliffe offers “this laying-to-let-lie-before-us functions as a preservation of others’ ideas (194-215) and, hence, as a site for listening” (2005, 23-24). It follows that solely associating the *logos* with stating results in a “halved” or

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3 Thinkers like Mariana Ortega have asserted that Heidegger maintains a dominant interpretation of being-with that completely ignores the lived experience of being “between” worlds or the experience of a “multiplicitious” self (2016, 59, 130).

4 It is important to note that it’s hard to differentiate what was actually the original Greek intent and what Heidegger has projected onto ancient Greek thinkers.

5 See Fiumara 1990.
“divided” understanding of the *logos* because we have “the *logos* that speaks but does not listen” (24).

The natural question to raise here is why is the displacement of listening a problem? The simple answer is that the dislocation of listening means that we often think and speak in a self or ego-centered manner, which causes us to think and speak over and against things. As was mentioned at the start of this section, nearness for Heidegger requires “attending to what is near” and attending to what is near entails that we utilize “a more inclusive *logos*” whereby we first and foremost listen to things (2005, 25). When we listen, we can “take-to-heart” what bids (*Geheiss*) or calls us to think and speak in the first place while remaining hidden or veiled in its withdrawal: the being of things themselves (Heidegger [1954] 2004, 17, 161-171; Bartky 1970, 368). Here we have a point most fully shared not by Uchiyama but by one of the Kyôto School’s most famous pupils, Nishitani Keiji.

In Nishitani’s text *What is Religion? (Shūkyō to wa nanika)*, which was published in English as *Religion and Nothingness*, he writes:

> It may sound strange to say that “things” preach the dharma or speak the *logos*. But everything we know of rational order is from things. It is what we hear from things. All our knowledge springs from and returns to the place where, in Basho’s words, we should

From the pine tree
learn (the *koto*) of the pine tree,
And from the bamboo
learn (the *koto*) of the bamboo. (1983, 195)

Nishitani goes on to say, “The pine speaks the *koto* of the pine tree, the bamboo the *koto* of the bamboo. Our ‘knowing’ rational order, or *logos*, always begins from and ends in the place where things speak of themselves, of their own *koto*” (195). For Heidegger the act of listening allows us to let go of our conceptual grasp and engage in a “making room” (einräumen) for and “giving space” (Raum-geben) to things so that things are able to let-lie-before-us as they are on their own terms and of their own *koto* (207; 2010, 108 [111]; Casey 1998, 252). It can now be said that opening the hand of thought for Heidegger stems from listening and as is detailed in the next section, by listening and letting go of our conceptual grasp we are invited into a more essential and “meditative” mode of thinking and discourse.

### 6. OPENHANDED THINKING AND DISCOURSE

Heidegger’s last comprehensive lecture series occurred in 1957 at Freiburg University and goes by the title “Basic Principles of Thinking.” In the fifth and final lecture

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6 See Ratcliffe 2005.

7 There is a considerable discussion of *koto* and what is defined as the “Japanese word for language” *Koto ba* in Heidegger’s “A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer” in *On The Way to Language* ([1959] 1982, 45-53).
comprising this series on thinking, opening the hand of thought with Heidegger can be read as entailing that “Thinking leaps away from thinking and being, away from the λόγος - …” (2012, 149). Here letting go of what is in our mental hand is characterized as a “leap into the abyss” since “…thinking relinquishes its λόγος -character in a certain way…” (150). Yet, the leap into the graspslessness of the open hand is not an abandonment of thought and language, but abandonment of a fractured conception of the logos. By letting go of this misconception about the essential nature of thinking, the logos is made whole, and as Heidegger goes on to write, “…and nonetheless does not forget from the outset it (thinking) would be determined by the λόγος” (150). What Heidegger offers here is that thinking is inherently connected or entwined with our engagement in language or discourse such that to attune our thinking to the fullness or truth of a thing’s being necessitates a change in our discursive comportment as well.

For Heidegger it is the listening that underpins opening the hand of thought since listening means that we let go of what we say about things so that we can truly take-to-heart and “safeguard” what lies-before-us (1954 [2004], 211). As Heidegger proposes, “Taking is not grasping, but letting come what lies before us” (211). For Heidegger, opening the hand of thought allows us to experience an “undivided logos” (Ratcliffe 2005, 24-25). As was already alluded to, this wholistic use of the logos at work when we open the hand of thought should not be understood as the end of thought and discourse, but the end of how thinking and speaking have been predominantly understood in relation to grasping hold of things and conceptual conquest. At the same time, this end signals the beginning of a radically different mode of thinking and discourse that enables us to have what Heidegger calls in On The Way to Language, a “thinking experience with language” ([1959] 1982, 80).

In typical Heideggerian fashion the kind of thinking that emerges when we open the hand of thought has a variety of designations like “originative thinking” (anfängliches Denken) and “essential thinking” (wesentliches Denken) (Bartky 1970, 368). However, the most relevant and suitable designation for this new mode of thinking is what Heidegger calls “meditative thinking” (besinnliches Denken). Heidegger views this meditative mode of thought as dramatically divergent from the kind of “calculative thinking” (rechnendes Denken) that is motivated by a fractured logos and is solely concerned with stating and grasping.

The meditative thinking of the open hand is informed by listening or as Heidegger tells us in On The Way To Language, “…Thinking is a listening to the grant” ({1959} 1982, 75-76). That said, at a more fundamental level this meditative thinking is characterized by a “Releasement toward things” (Gelassenheit zu den Dingen) and “An openness to the mystery” (Offenheit für das Geheimnis) (Heidegger 1966, 54-55). In What is Called Thinking? Heidegger concludes:

Thinking, then, is not a grasping, neither the grasp of what lies before us, nor an attack upon it. In λέγειν and νοεῖν, what lies before us is not manipulated by means of grasping. Thinking is not grasping or prehending. In the high youth of its unfolding essence, thinking knows nothing of the grasping concept (Begriff). ([1954] 2004, 211)
Here thinking is no longer associated with the act of grasping or to use Uchiyama’s words, thinking no longer, “means to be grasping or holding on to something with our brain’s conceptual ‘fist’” (2004, 28). Thinking for Heidegger is now understood in terms of “releasement” (Gelassenheit) (Pezze 2006). This fundamental change to what we call thinking for Heidegger does not entail an estrangement from reality or thoughtlessness. By opening the hand of thought we are open to and focused on the full reality of things. When we think in this meditatively “released” manner we can, “…dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now; here, this patch of home ground; now, in the present hour of history” (Heidegger 1966, 47).

As for the change to discourse, opening the hand of thought means that we no longer encounter our own voice first or as Heidegger writes in the Grundbegriffe, “before” (primär) (2009, 21). Rather it is the case that we are open to the reality that we are first and foremost respondents to and with others (21). As Heidegger’s former student Hans-Georg Gadamer suggestes, “Anyone who listens is fundementally open” or as Heidegger writes in Being and Time during a section dealing with Dasein and discourse, “Listening even constitutes the primary and authentic openness of Dasein for its ownmost possibility of being, as in hearing the voice of the friend whom Dasein carries with it” (quoted in Fiumara 1990, 28; 2010, 158 [163]). This openhanded change through listening means that our discursive comportment is no longer informed by a self-centered stating or saying something about things but is concerned with responding to things in a way that holds open a space for things to be truly and freely what they are.

The nature of this openhanded and meditative discourse takes on many forms throughout Heidegger’s philosophy. In Being and Time Heidegger turns to “silence” (Schweigen) and what can be described as a “silent discourse.” Heidegger writes in Being and Time:

Thus the mode of articulative discourse belonging to wanting to have a conscience is reticence [Verschwiegenheit]. We characterize silence [Schweigen] as an essential possibility of discourse. Whoever wants to give something to understand in silence must “have something to say.” In the summons, Dasein gives itself to understand its ownmost potentiality-of-being. Thus this calling is a keeping silent. The discourse of conscience never comes to utterance. Conscience only calls silently; that is, the call comes from the soundlessness of uncanniness and calls Dasein thus summoned back to become still in the stillness of itself. Wanting to have a conscience thus understands this silent discourse appropriately only in reticence. It takes the words away from the commonsense idle chatter of the they. (2010, 283-284 [296])

In the above quote Heidegger unpacks a distinction that he makes earlier in the text between “discourse” (Rede) and the detrimental “idle chatter” (Gerede) produced by the “publicness” (Öffentlichkeit) of “the they” (das Man) (2010, 111 [114], 161-173 [167-180]). Idle chatter can be read as propagating a closing off to the reality of things because language is used in accordance with the reductivity of the as-structure and ultimately a fractured logos. So, part of what Heidegger offers in Being and Time is the
idea that when we open the hand of thought through listening our subsequent responding is really a “discourse” (Rede) characterized by reverent “reticence” (Verschwiegenheit) or simply “silence” (Schweigen).

If we move to Heidegger’s Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (the Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)) written between 1936-1938, the openhanded discourse rooted in a silent reverent reticence from Being and Time morphs into the “sigetic.” For Heidegger the sigetic recognizes the limitations of language to say something about Being, and thus utilizes silence as a way to acknowledge Being without making any kind of assertion about Being (1999, 55 [38]). It is not until Heidegger’s later work that the type of meditatively released discourse that emerges from opening the hand of thought finds its final embodiment in poetic language.

To be fair, Heidegger hints at the import of poetic language in Being and Time writing, “The communication of the existential possibilities of attunement, that is, the disclosing of existence, can become the true aim of ‘poetic’ speech” (2010, 157 [162]). That said, it is in Heidegger’s later philosophy that he fixates on poetic language as capable of making room for the mysterious “opacity” (Undurchsichtigkeit), “density” (Dichten), or as Uchiyama writes “ungraspability” of what is absolutely or undeniably real. According to Gerald Bruns’s translation, poetic language for Heidegger epitomizes openhanded discourse since poetry is a “…letting go of the ground; it means letting language go, which is the same as letting language speak and things thing: Das Wort be-dingt das Ding zum Ding” (Bruns 1989, 178; Heidegger [1959] 1982, 151).

The key similarity for Heidegger between openhanded discourse and poetry seems to be in how the poet exudes an appreciation for a “…different rule of the word.” This different discursive style means that, “The poet must relinquish the claim to the assurance that he will on demand be supplied with the name for that which he has posited as what truly is” (Heidegger [1959] 1982, 146-147). In this way the poet recognizes the ambiguity and limitations of language, and thus poetic language is able to speak “…as the peal of stillness” (205).

7. HEIDEGGER’S MISTAKE

It was stated that Heidegger describes the lectures that constitute What is Called Thinking? as an effort to “learn thinking.” Heidegger likens this learning process to learning how to build a cabinet in that we are engaged in what Heidegger calls in German a Handwerk “handiwork” or what in in English can be called “handicraft” ([1954] 2004, 16). Heidegger views humans as unique in that we are thinking beings or beings that have been gifted with not just the capacity to think, but to engage in the open Handwerk of what was just detailed as this more essentially attuned and meditative mode of thinking and discourse (17).

If we study the contours of “Heidegger’s Hand” as Jacques Derrida deems it in a lecture given at Cornell University in 1985, Handwerk has an artisanal or handmade quality. In one sense this artisanal quality simply means that opening the hand of thought is not easily achieved or a state one arrives at. Opening the hand of thought and the mode of thinking and discourse it produces must be learned and practiced. This is
the same kind of learning and practice associated with Uchiyama’s explanation of zazen or the lifelong *Handwerk* of the artisan chocolatier.

However, Heidegger mistakenly takes the artisanal quality to also mean that opening the hand of thought and the mode of thinking and discourse it begets are not open to all. This limitation is in stark contrast to Uchiyama. While it is true that Uchiyama can be described as privileging zazen, the practice of zazen does not mean that only a practicing Buddhist can open the hand of thought. For Uchiyama, opening the hand of thought is accessible to all because zazen is the meditative practice of not grasping and clinging to thought, and such a meditative practice can be engaged by anyone, anytime, anywhere. Conversely, Heidegger concludes that the artisanal quality associated with opening the hand of thought means that this more essential mode of thinking and discourse that arises from letting go of our conceptual grasp is the privilege of a certain group of people, and most acutely the German people of his era (Knowles 2019, 36-57).

The reason for Heidegger’s mistake is rooted in his emphasis on silence and silent discourse. For Heidegger silence is a capacity that while perhaps not solely monopolized by the German people of his era, it is most exceptionally and authentically realizable in and by the German people. Admittedly, this view of silence seems to demonstrate a slight difference between Heidegger and the *völkisch* thought of those like Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss. Yet, I agree with Adam Knowles’s assessment that Heidegger’s emphasis on silence demonstrates an “affinity” for *völkisch* thought (2019, 38).

If we turn to Heidegger’s reification of poetic language, this move clearly reinforces an unhelpful distinction between domains of life like aesthetics and the sciences. Heidegger is often viewed as having embraced a kind of scientism or anti-scientific position, which is exemplified in an assertion about how scientific knowledge, “...annihilated things as things long before the atom bomb exploded” ([1971] 2001, 168). Simultaneously, Heidegger’s insistence on poetic language is also concerning due to the fact that it is connected to his affinity for *völkisch* thought.

Heidegger’s move towards poetic language is informed by a lecture series on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* delivered in 1931 (Knowles 2019, 79). In this lecture series Heidegger reads Aristotle as modeling the poetic measure of language, which is to say that in “production” (*poiēsis*) one must understand the limits within which one is working (95, 97). For Heidegger the limits or the measure of productive discourse are only maintained with silence, and he sees Aristotle as demonstrating this fact. The rhetorical style that Heidegger finds in Aristotle is not the closed use of language where Being is reductively sealed up in the as-structure and consigned to the unappreciated background of readiness-to-hand. Instead, Aristotle is said to model a rhetorical openness that is attuned to the reality that we can’t exhaust a thing through words, things are always deeper than what we state about them. However, Heidegger does not just recognize this facility for silent discourse as specific to Aristotle’s philosophical prowess, but he identifies it as a uniquely Greek conception of silence and way of thinking and speaking through silence (98).
According to Adam Knowles in ancient Greece a significant feature of manliness was one’s ability to “master silence” in the sense that a real man knows when to be silent and when not be (102-103, 124, 126). The kind of elitism identified by Knowles means that one is afforded the privilege to speak and more importantly the privilege to be silent. Such a privilege in ancient Greece is said to be, “associated solely with virtuous Greek men, as opposed to women, slaves, and non-Greeks” (125). Therefore, problematically preserved in Heidegger’s approach to opening the hand of thought is a gendered notion of “male self-mastery” in relation to silence (102, 148). Additionally, and in true völkisch fashion, the Heidegger of the 1930s took the German people to be most uniquely capable of opening the hand of thought and dwelling by a poetically measured mode of thinking and discourse because they are viewed as having inherited the mastery of silence directly from the ancient Greeks (153). Despite Heidegger’s deeply wrong turn here, the meditative mode of thinking and discourse that Heidegger views as arising out of opening the hand of thought is a valuable insight and ultimately compatible with Uchiyama’s perspective.

8. CONCLUSION: UCHIYAMA AND HEIDEGGER’S COMPATIBILITY

Understanding the compatibility between Uchiyama and Heidegger requires an appreciation for a frequent misconception about Buddhist and Eastern philosophies and traditions. This misconception maintains that a deeper experience of reality is achieved by transcending or abandoning the use of thought and discourse (Wright 1992, 114). As Dale Wright expresses about Zen Buddhism, “Not only are we mistaken when we understand the Zen master to have achieved this state, we also render him incapable of the worldly ‘function’ for which he is famous” (122-123). Wright’s argument is that the entwined engagement of thought and discourse are not just important to everyday life and keep us all from sliding into a nonsensical relativism, but discourse and thought are an integral part of Buddhist practice. Without the elements of thought and discourse, neither the monks nor the daily monastic operations would be able to function (126). So rather than negating or transcending thought and language, a practitioner of any philosophy or tradition dedicated to opening the hand of thought is still very much utilizing thought and linguistic expression. However, what does occur for these practitioners is a “fundamental reorientation” within thinking and discourse that not only informs their daily life, but it is also at work in zazen or the meditative practice of not grasping and clinging to thought (126, 133-135).

An example of this openhanded and meditative reorientation within thinking and discourse can be found in the Buddhist use of “turning words.” Turning words aim to “‘turn’ the mind of properly trained practitioners away from an attachment to and absorption in language” (127-133). This is to say that when we open the hand of thought with Uchiyama and Heidegger, part of what is occurring is a realization that thought and language are always limited and inadequate to experience. This realization does not mean we do away with thought and linguistic expression, but that we try to avoid clinging to what we think and say about things. Not grasping or clinging to our thoughts and linguistic expressions means that we think and speak in a humble manner that
consistently recognizes the limitations of our conceptual reach, which in turn honors or stays open to the undeniable reality that things are more than what we grasp about them.

As Nancy McCagney rightly highlights in her text *Nāgārjuna and The Philosophy of Openness*, recognizing the limits of thought and language does not lead to a “catatonic stupor” or having to retreat from the world into silent meditation (1997, 80). Instead, we undergo a fundamental reorientation in our thinking, which by virtue of their entwinement creates a shift in how we comport ourselves discursively as well. This reorientation moves us away from selfishly clinging to our thoughts and linguistic expressions about things and towards a meditatively “released,” or as McCagney offers “a nonattached” usage of thought and discourse so as to stay attuned and open to the full presence of things (80).

In the end, for both Uchiyama and Heidegger, letting go of our conceptual grasp is not an end to thought and linguistic expression or a step toward an irrational oblivion. To quote the line from Stefan George’s poem that Heidegger himself invokes in *On The Way to Language*, “Where word breaks off no thing may be” (quoted in Heidegger ([1959] 1982, 108). This breaking off of the word just like the opening of the hand of thought allows an “is” to arise or allows a thing to return to “soundlessness” where it is truly free to be what it is (108). For Uchiyama and Heidegger opening the hand of thought is a profound breaking off of the word. This breaking off by letting go of our conceptual grasp for both thinkers is a critical reorientation within thought and language, and thus the “true step back on the way” toward a more attuned and compassionate mode of thinking and discourse (108; 2001, 158; Uchiyama 2004, 76-77).

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