Being-there and Becoming: The Original Way of Human Beings

A Comparative Study of “Dasein” in Heidegger and “Bhava” in Theravāda Buddhism

Sumalee Mahanarongchai
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Theravāda Buddhism.

1. Ontology.  2. Space and time.
3. Space and time -- Religious aspects -- Buddhism.

QA76.9.D343

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First edition -April 2014, 300 copies
e-book January 2015

Published and distributed by Thammasat University Press
U1 Floor, Thammasat 60th Bldg., Thammasat University
Phrachan Road, Bangkok 10200 Thailand
Tel. 0-223-9232, 0-2613-3801-2
Fax. 0-226-2083
(Rangsit Campus Tel. 0-2564-2859-60)
e-mail address: unipress@tu.ac.th

Printed by Ideol Digital Print Co., Ltd.
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Among Thai readers, the name of Martin Heidegger may not be familiar, but for those who are impressed by continental philosophy especially on the field of phenomenology and existentialism, his name is well recognized. At the first time I read his prominent book, *Being and Time*, many of his arguments, though difficult and preliminary as he claimed, seemed compatible with some philosophical insights postulated in Buddhism. Most similarities may occur by coincidence, but even so, it is not strange why his fundamental ontology has been usually taken into comparison with some great Asian lines of thought such as Hinduism, Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

This project results from an endeavor to study the way of human being, or Being-there which is called “*Dasein*,” in comparison with each moment of becoming which is termed “*Bhava*” in Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda tradition is selected for two reasons. First, it is the branch of Buddhism which draws its scriptural inspiration from the earliest surviving record of the Buddha’s teachings or Pāli canon. Following the teaching of the Elders since the first council, it is believed that Theravāda monks can maintain the early doctrine due to their conservative characteristic. To compare Heidegger’s Being-there with Theravādins’ Becoming can provide us a clue to understand the true and basic philosophy underlying the existence of human beings in both traditions.

The second reason why Theravāda tradition is selected is clear from the fact that in prior to the rise of this project no comparative study between Heidegger and Theravāda philosophy was explicitly done. In order to understand the true wisdom of both sides, it is necessary to quest for, and lay bare, the original concept which is the ground of apparent theories. Only after the ground is revealed, a theory can be illumined in its own way as a particular theory. So, “Being-there” in Heidegger and “Becoming” in Theravāda Buddhism which represent the original way of human being are thoroughly explored in this book. Understanding of these two original concepts is the main purpose of this project.
Despite of all difficulties, this project is completely fulfilled after five years of conceptual investigation and clarification. It is the extended version of my Ph.D. thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India. I would like to express my gratitude to Indian government and this university. Sent and sponsored by Indian government, I have been ascertained by the academic atmosphere of Jawaharlal Nehru University that the realm of knowledge is not restricted by the border of the place. I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Bhagat Oinam, who encourages me to follow my academic curiosity. I am thankful to all professors including Dr. Prasenjit Biswas who give me some beneficial comments and suggestions. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Manash Jyoti Deka, Ven. Phramaha Thanasith Sitthiyana (Chatsuwan) and Thanisara Prathanrasnikorn who have sent me copies of books and articles which are referred in this book. Finally, I would like to thank my dad and my mom who have encouraged me to write and waited with patience to see my success. Without the support from these persons and many others, this project can never be accomplished.

Sumalee Mahanarongchai,
Thammasat University,
Bangkok, 2014.
Dasein is a technical term Heidegger chooses to explain the fundamental and ontological mode of Being. Heidegger pays attention to this mode of Being for his philosophy aims to discover what he calls “fundamental ontology.” Fundamental ontology deals with human existence and goes beyond factual (or surface) level. Ontology has its purpose in analyzing Being whereas other sciences merely describe empirical properties and contingent characteristics of entities. His ontology is fundamental because it analyzes Being and the constitution of Being that all humans occupy. Other sciences like history, sociology and psychology only describe diverse factual manifestations of human life.

In order to understand the ontology of existence, we need to explore our own Being. Dasein is the term specifically used to identify this kind of dynamic Being. The term denotes an explication of an entity with regard to its own Being. In other words, Dasein is the mode of Being that includes the possibilities to be. Before we start exploring Dasein in detail, it will be helpful to trace our investigation back to Greek era where the notion of being had first been questioned and formally developed by Aristotle who is one of outstanding Greek philosophers.
The Question of Being

The question of Being has long been raised and formulated. Aristotle states in his famous book, *Metaphysics*, that Being is the primary thing the mind conceives. It is fundamental to human thought. First philosophy is defined as the study of Being as such which establishes the first principles of all sciences. According to Aristotle, Being can be said in many ways. Four ways to mention Being are most rudimentary. First, Being *is* what is said to be incidentally (κατὰ συμβηκός). Second, Being *is* in the sense of being true. Third, Being *is* in the sense of being potentially or actually. And fourth, Being is said in ten categories usually translated as substance, quantity, quality, relation, location, time, position, state, action, and passion.

Aristotelian contributions toward the interpretation of Being lead to a number of prejudices. A prejudice on which Heidegger focuses is the endeavor to shape the primordial understanding of Being into an universal concept applies to all kinds of existence. Being becomes a general term of highest genus that embraces everything. Not only immanent in everything, it is also transcendent from all categories. Heidegger appraises Aristotle in putting the problem of Being on a new basis. Yet, he criticizes Aristotle in his failure to clear away the darkness of this categorical interconnection.

More and more we try to cope with our own beings, more and more we are trapped by wrong conceptual formulation. Heidegger urges us to raise the question of Being in the right manner. Being of an entity is not an extraordinary entity. Being is something that determines entities as entities, but "the Being of entities *is* not itself an entity." He tries to redeem the concept of Being from the concept of entity by saying:

If we are to understand the problem of Being, our first philosophical step consists in not ‘telling a story’ – that is to say, in not defining entities as entities by tracing them back in their origin to some other entities, as if Being had the character of some possible entity. Hence, Being, as that
which is asked about, must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from the way in which entities are discovered. Accordingly, what is to be found out by the asking—the meaning of Being—also demands that it be conceived in a way of its own, essentially contrasting with the concepts in which entities acquire their determinate signification.6

What Heidegger has done in his book, *Being and Time*, is to raise the question of Being. His intention is to unravel the concealment of Being in the course of time. He further adds that despite the concept of Being is claimed to be indefinable or unable to be expressed by definition, we can still question it. The claim merely shows that Being cannot have the character of an entity to which traditional logic provides a justifiable definition. According to Heidegger, the indefinability of Being does not undermine the question of its meaning.

Some philosophers may argue that Being is the self-evident concept. It is a tacit self-evident expression that needs no testimony. We can always affirm the Being of our existence. Heidegger opposes to this claim. He insists that the question on the meaning of Being must be first formulated. In fact, he does not deny any conception drawn on Being. He states clearly that the concept of Being should be first developed to make clear the average understanding of Being.7 The development implies a way to treat the concept of Being in its own manner without categorizing it into a transcendent but general form of entity.

What Heidegger tries to achieve in his book is to distinguish “Being” of an entity from *being* merely an entity. The former “Being” cannot be an entity in the usual sense. Heidegger finds it through the analysis of “Dasein.” Dasein is distinctive because it discloses Being in such a way that a person must understand his own existence. Dasein always understands itself in terms of existence or possibility (of itself). It chooses to be itself, or not itself, and also decides its existence.8

In contrast, being in the usual sense denotes an entity and entity in general signifies a real thing or a thing with distinct and real existence.9 The existence of that thing can be isolated from any of its qualities and from relation with other things. Entity also implies something that exists as a single and complete unit.10
Heidegger attacks against any explanation of Being in terms of an entity rendered by these definitions. For him, though Dasein can be understood as a special kind of entity, this entity has Being as its own issue. Neither Being nor Dasein is a real independent entity in the same way other transcendental entities like God, the Form, or the Ultimate is. These latter Beings should be termed “Being-ness” rather than “Being.” Likewise, neither Being in Heidegger’s elaboration is being in the sense of an entity, nor is it identical to Being-ness which is an absolute idea.

The Problem of Being [I]:

The Substance-based Ontology

The problem of Being has started by Greek interpretation of this term. A number of prejudices have been inserted by such interpretation until the true (and average) understanding of Being is entirely overlooked. The term “Being” is often used to connote a most universal concept following Aristotle and medieval scholastics. It is sometimes understood as a transcendental entity which absolutely embraces all existents within the same absolute category.

Since the epoch of pre-philosophical Greek, Being is commonly referred to “what there is” in the sense of “things” or “states of affairs.” But the meaning of Being is formally categorized by Aristotle. Aristotle distinguishes as many meanings of being as there are categories of entities. Among ten categories of entities, substance is the primary being designating natural things that can exist in their own right. The rest of entities are attributes existing on the ground of substance. By this sense, “to be” thus means either to be a substance, or to be attributes of that substance. Since the being of a substance and its attributes are irreducibly different, there is no sense of being that can be predicated of items in all categories. There is only an “analogy of being.” Frede states that in recent years an analogy of being has been named “focal meaning” to indicate the centrality of the substance.
Heidegger substitutes Aristotle’s substance-oriented ontology with the meaning-based ontology by entrenching fundamental ontology. He shifts the categories of “all that is” to the categories of our understanding of Being. All categories become merely elements and means to interpret the meaning of what is experienced. “To be” thus means to be understood as something. Within this new paradigm, Heidegger can accomplish at least two tasks. First, he can clarify the meaning of Being by differentiating it from the meaning of an entity. He says:

Entities are, quite independently of the experience by which they are disclosed, the acquaintance in which they are discovered, and the grasping in which their nature is ascertained. But Being ‘is’ only in the understanding of those entities to whose Being something like an understanding of Being belongs. Hence, Being can be something unconceptualized, but it never completely fails to be understood.

Second, he blurs the dualistic boundary of subject-object dichotomy and brings nature (in the sense of external objects) into the realm of experience. External objects cannot be viewed separately from the perceiving subject, so focusing on the meaning of object given to subject is more important and authentic than focusing on a substance and its attributes. This is a reason why understanding and interpretation are so significant in Heidegger’s theoretical formulation of fundamental ontology.

Influenced by a philosopher, Duns Scotus, who realized that objective reality is determined by the thinking subject’s understanding, Heidegger repeats in his book the interdependence between interpretation and reality in temporal experience. This preliminary understanding brings about the framework of his philosophy. According to him, philosophy is the universal phenomenological ontology that takes its departure from the hermeneutic of Dasein.

The substance-based ontology brings some difficulties into the rendition of Being. First, it drives Being into categories of entities. The “Being” of entity is thus undermined and neglected. Furthermore, Aristotelian view on substance as the primary entity yields to the overemphasis on pure objectivity whereas perceived
objects can exist independently from perceiving subjects. The attitude behind this theoretical stance clearly promotes the subject-object independency.

This means that the thinker can treat the objects of his investigation as “indifferently occurring” things that subsist freely beyond observation. In other words, the observer and the observed are regarded as mere occurrences alongside one another. If using Heidegger’s terminology, such “mere occurrence” signifies something present-at-hand which is just one of several modes of Beings we confront in daily concern. The substance-based ontology, therefore, not only conceals the primordial mode of Being, but is also unable to understand Being in its average everydayness. Being is concealed in daily life because it is taken for granted as the substance of things perceived side-by-side at hand.

The Problem of Being [II]: Misunderstanding of Metaphysics

Not only Aristotelian interpretation is troublesome, but the problem found in Greek ontology is the search for a kind of philosophy that can be an inquiry into foundations of science. This kind of philosophy is termed and understood as metaphysics. Metaphysics deals with an enquiry into the essence of everything empirical, as Simon Glendinning points; an inquiry into everything insofar as it is. Metaphysics is an inquiry which aims to understand the whole universe of beings. It is an inquiry which aims to grasp the essence of everything empirical as the ground or the foundation. It is an inquiry into the Being as the ground of all beings. It is also an inquiry which concerns itself with beings as beings-as-a-whole. And finally it is an inquiry over being.

Metaphysics is a historical form of philosophical inquiry which contrasts with fundamental ontology established by Heidegger. To sharpen the point of controversy, metaphysics is ontology in the widest sense. It copes with an inquiry into the “Being” of beings in various domains upon which sciences inaugurate and
develop their specific theories. Sciences like psychology, history or physics are then ontical (or ontic) inquiries into beings of all kinds. Fundamental ontology, by contrast, concerns only with an inquiry into Being as such. Sciences study beings in apparent multi-dimensions. Metaphysics pays attention to the essence of beings. The elementary Being of beings is substance which can stand on its own existence.

Since metaphysics and (positive) sciences restrict their scopes of investigation only at the concept of Being (or Being-ness) in general and beings in particular, they cannot go beyond the domain of entity. And since they cannot go beyond the domain of entity, they can never touch the question of Being in the right manner. What metaphysics and particular sciences have done is merely to expose and categorize entities from the narrowest to the widest sense. The question of Being has been thus neglected in the course of time due to its too-much-familiarity taken for granted by naïve theoreticians or scientists, and due to its too-averageness which is always overlooked by speculative metaphysicians.

In his article ‘Introduction to “What is Metaphysics?”’ Heidegger tries to clarify the truth of Being from mere beings. To make a question on Being, we need to explore the tree of philosophy in which metaphysics takes a role of the root. The traditional metaphysics can represent only beings as beings. Although it aims to discover the essence of being, traditional metaphysics does never recall Being itself. The truth of Being has still been concealed from metaphysics during its long history from Anaximander to Nietzsche. The mistake of traditional metaphysics lies on its failure to question the truth of Being. Heidegger says:

In fact, metaphysics never answers the question concerning the truth of Being, for it never asks this question. Metaphysics does not ask this question because it thinks Being only by representing beings as beings. It means beings as a whole, although it speaks of Being. It names Being and means beings as beings. From its beginning to its completion, the propositions of metaphysics have been strangely involved in a persistent confusion of beings and Being. This confusion, to be sure, must be considered an event and not a mere mistake.
The confusion of beings (Die Seiendes) and Being (Das Sein) reflects what he calls the ontological difference.\(^2\) The confusion implies the interchangeable substitution. The thought about beings is a representational type. What is known as the truth always appears in a derivative form of cognitive knowledge and propositions that formulate such knowledge. Being, on the contrary, is the unconcealedness of existence whereby our thinking stands of its own accord. This latter mode of thinking constitutes the full essence of existence by standing in the openness of Being, sustaining the “in-standing” or care, and enduring in what is most extreme; that is to say, being toward death.\(^3\)

Heidegger summarizes his critique against metaphysics by showing that traditional metaphysics always represents beings in their totality; it shows “Being-ness” of beings. Metaphysics represents “Being-ness” of being in a twofold manner. First, the totality of beings is understood as their most universal traits. Second, the totality of beings is understood in the sense of the highest or divine being. In the first place, the totality has been explained through the concept of universality, thus indicates ontology in the narrow sense. In the second place, the totality has been explained through the concept of highest being, thus indicates theology.\(^4\)

This two-fold manner leads metaphysics astray and leaves behind the oblivion of Being. The task of metaphysics in acquiring about the Being of beings is, therefore, incomplete. Metaphysics is in fact an inquiry beyond or over beings, but so far before the time of Heidegger, it has seemingly failed to unveil Being as such. So long as traditional metaphysics still views Being as a substance, or a special entity, or a universal concept, or Being-ness, the genuine primordial Being will remain concealed.
The Problem of Being [III]:
Husserl’s Transcendental Ego

Not merely Aristotle’s substance-based ontology is attacked on the issue of subject-object independence, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is also accused of incurring similar trouble. Husserl suggests what he calls “transcendental phenomenology” with respect to the formation of universal science. This universal science identifies the constitution of the objectivity of all objects and brings about the transcendental subjects to full presence. It aims to identify the Being of all beings in all regions. The constitution has its ultimate ground in the structure of absolute subjectivity.25

Husserl describes his phenomenology as the science of essences. In order to obtain essential knowledge, it is necessary that consciousness must be viewed independently from contingent elements which accompany it. Husserl fulfills his idealistic project by adopting the bracketing technique called “epoché” within which external objects will be left out of consideration or isolated from the subject’s meaningful experience. The whole of phenomenology is carried out within the condition at which the technique is operative. The epoché serves to eliminate doubt and transcend human consciousness to the purest and most essential stage.

“Epoché” is the successive technique required in a phenomenological reduction where epistemological breakthrough is gained through one’s own consciousness as pure phenomenon, or as the totality of one’s pure mental processes. A phenomenological exercise must inhibit every co-performance of objective positing operative in unreflective consciousness. The world as it simply exists must be taken over by the world as given in consciousness. The world as such will be “the world in brackets” where individual things in the world are replaced by the respective meaning of each in various modes of consciousness.26
According to Husserl, there are three procedures in the method of
phenomenological reduction. The outcome of phenomenological reduction is
genuine inner experience which will in turn be the means to access the invariant
essential structures of the total sphere of pure mental process. Three procedures
are:

(1) The *epoché* will be applied to every objective positing in the psychic
sphere.

(2) The multiple appearances as the appearances of unitary objects and
their accrued constituted unities of meaning will be seized and
described.

(3) A two-fold direction of the *noetic* (the subjective act) and the *noematic*
(the content of that which is appearing) of phenomenological
description will be shown.

For Husserl, phenomenological reduction should not be understood as a
quantitative deduction. Rather, it is “*a gradual penetration into the purified essential
residue by a constant application of the epoché. It reveals the pure subjectivity as
the exclusive source of all objectivity.*” The reduction is not a theory or a claim.
Rather, it is a procedure. It is not something for us to believe, but something for us to
do. In its purest form it will be expressed “*not in declarative sentences purporting to
be true, relevant, justified, or logically consistent, but rather in imperatives.*”

Husserl’s concern is that the object must be taken only as a meaning
grasped by consciousness. The conception of intentionality of consciousness and
transcendental subjectivity are Husserlian core of transcendental phenomenology.
According to Husserl, the term “transcendental” is used in the broadest sense for
original motif whereas original motif is the principle of inquiring back into the
ultimate source of all formations of knowledge. The motif concerns “*the knower’s
reflecting upon himself and his knowing life in which all the scientific structures
that are valid for him occur purposefully, are stored up as acquisitions, and have
become and continue to become freely available.*”
Transcendental philosophy is the science of transcendental subjectivity that sublimes psychology into pure psychology whereby nothing is more subsumed than the subject-in-itself. Husserl states:

During the time in which I am a transcendental or pure phenomenologist, I am exclusively within transcendental self-consciousness, and I am my own subject matter exclusively as transcendental ego in terms of everything intentionally implied therein. Here there is no objectivity as such at all; here there are objectivity, things, world, and world-science (including, then, all positive sciences and philosophies), only as my—the transcendental ego’s—phenomena.31

In order to approach the exact and genuine knowledge which can both enrich human soul and enlarge the content of the world in every aspect, phenomenologists, psychologists, and scientists are compelled to develop the method of phenomenological reduction. Through such reduction, the functioning ego-subjects of all world-knowledge and mundane accomplishment will be discovered. Husserl criticizes positive sciences in providing hypotheses about the world because they provide hypotheses on the basement of pre-given world. The world in their understandings is the constant presupposition wherein the question concerns what the world is always belongs in the movement of induction from the known to the unknown.

But the method of transcendental phenomenology is reduction. It questions the ground of the world through self-reflection and constitutions until the meanings of experience toward the world are derived. The method of reduction will provide the subjects the absolute freedom from all prejudices. Husserl not merely intends to bring the technique of epoché into its full purport, but also establishes the absolutely functioning subjectivity, not as human subjectivity, but as the subjectivity which objectifies itself in human.32

Heidegger opposes to Husserl in some points with respect to their different reflections on worldly existence. He does not agree with Husserl’s phenomenological reduction to the extent that we should isolate worldly things and events in derivation of subjectivity. A main criticism Heidegger makes against
Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology lies on his belief that phenomenological method can describe only phenomenologically-reduced consciousness. Such phenomenology looks like a closed sphere of investigation concerned exclusively to its own problems.\textsuperscript{33}

Some philosophers including Gadamer believe that the working out of questions about Being is the distinctive characteristic of Heidegger’s ontology in comparison with Husserl’s phenomenology.\textsuperscript{34} The questions Heidegger raise about Being may be an attempt to overcome the groundlessness of Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity. This argument is plausible since Husserl states that performance of phenomenological reduction will reveal to us a new region of being which is essentially unique and can in fact become the field for a new science which deals with absolute experiences. He calls this field of absolute experiences the basic field of Phenomenology.\textsuperscript{35}

But the region of being in Husserl’s explanation is opaque and hard to comprehend. After all ontological commitments that comprise the natural attitude are bracketed, we will immediately be presented with what is inherent within consciousness. The reduction is claimed “to present us with absolute or pure transcendental consciousness which is left over as a residuum.”\textsuperscript{36} The reduction tends to split the ego into two broad levels of absolute ego and natural ego.

Husserl distinguishes the transcendental or absolute ego from the natural or conscious ego. The conscious ego that normally turns toward the world will be bracketed for the presence of the absolute ego. Although both egos denote the same entity, but these two terms reflect different ways of cognition in which consciousness stands to reality.\textsuperscript{37} The lower level of cognition rendered by an empirical being relates to external things or objects. The higher level of cognition undertook by transcendental being deals with inner experience and meaning. During the introspective observation of the states of consciousness and their causal interdependence, consciousness is understood in correspondence to what is like a spiritual being. A spiritual being belongs in the stage of intuition within which the pure subjectivity is revealed as the exclusive source of all objective phenomena.
Chapter One Dasein and the Problem of Being

This essential and original phenomenon exhibits a self-revealed and self-referential stream of consciousness that possesses the inner motivation for self-description. Despite it serves as a basis for the ontological hierarchy of experiential constitution, Husserl does not single out that spiritual being which is placed outside the physical and psychological domain. His phenomenology is thus like an internal or self-investigation that appears to be a closed system of idealistic philosophy.38

When he formulates the purely methodological principles of phenomenology, he frequently navigates his principle to something like monism of reflection upon which the self-manifestation of the pure transcendental phenomenon is focused. His methodology tends to promote pure subjectivity to which later philosophers including Heidegger disagree because this pure subjectivity cannot be shared with, or proven by, anyone. Bell adds that there is something dismal and dogmatic about a philosophy whose utility and plausibility depend essentially rather on the individual philosopher’s having undergone some esoteric experience, the nature of which he is unable to communicate. Insofar as one wishes to do Husserlian phenomenology, one needs to perform the phenomenological reduction. The adoption of this type of phenomenology cannot be a matter for rational deliberation. Instead, it is like a mystical conversion as a response to personal revelation.39

Heidegger tries to stay away from psychologism in phenomenological description of human existence. Unlike Husserl, what Heidegger has done is not to restructure psychologically the internal world, but to reorient Being-in-the-world. In Heidegger’s view, Being is neither the outcome of cognition nor phenomenological reflection. It is not that pure cognition reveals Being. Rather, the unconcealedness or openness of Being is the necessary condition for knowledge. This Being can be revealed through authentic understanding when one is fully aware of one’s own possibility and limitation in projection of oneself in the world.

Heidegger acknowledges with Husserl that Being can be derived through our understanding. Husserl’s transcendental subjectivism and anthropocentrism have a significant impact upon Heidegger’s thinking. Yet, Heidegger has found some crucial points of difficulties in Husserl’s approach that he robustly disagrees.
The disagreements can be summed up into three interrelated points as follows:

1. Heidegger refuses to treat the subject as an impersonal and transcendental ego that is infallible in its intuition about the content and activity of consciousness.

2. Heidegger opposes to phenomenological bracketing of the world. According to him, it is a big mistake in turning the objects of consciousness into the objects in consciousness.

3. Heidegger claims that Husserl’s ontology still remains tied to traditional theoretical stance.40

To solve the difficulty of one-sided overemphasis on pure consciousness, Heidegger has explained the first and the second point through the term “Dasein” and its basic constitution as Being-in-the-world and Being-along-with-the-world. A purpose of explanation is to expose fundamental ontology whereupon the subject and his circumstances cannot be viewed separately. Being is unfolded in the world and the world is known by Dasein’s existence. The interdependence between Being and the world is emphasized in his book. We will discuss this point in detail in the next section.

The third difficulty is remarkable here. It is interesting to explore why Heidegger thinks that Husserl’s ontology is still bound with traditional terrain. It seems to me that Husserl’s concept of transcendental ego is incapable to go beyond the realm of entity. Heidegger attacks against the static type of ontology in which the subject is severed from the rest and categorized as a purest form or concept. If Husserl really thinks that the transcendental ego is the purest being, his phenomenological subjectivity will either promote a sort of transcendental entity, or spring from substance-based ontology in Heideggerian understanding.
Being-there and Becoming: The Original Way of Human Beings

This is the first time the concepts of “Being” and “Being-there” in Heidegger are brought into a full-ranged investigation in parallel with the concept of “Becoming” in Theravāda Buddhism. The investigation has been done in three main aspects: spatial, temporal and moral. The aim of this comparative investigation is to reveal the original way of human beings to which what is later known as one’s own “self” is projected and declared in both traditions.