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# **Meditative Thinking and Poetic Dwelling: Heideggerin for Contemporary Human Flourishing and Authenticity**

**Sathya Balan**

Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune

**Abstract:** This paper is aimed to bring the analysis of one of the influential thinkers, Martin Heidegger, on the plight of the contemporary humans as they have become thought-poor in our age of science and technology. He sharply pointed out, “The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.” In this context, he contrasts the essential differences between calculative thinking and meditative thinking as well as the sources of these two types of thinking. The former is the manifestation of traditional metaphysics as a consequence of forgetting the primordial question of being, whereas the latter emerges from humans’ unique relation to the fact of

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being (ek-static openness). The meditative thinking demands an inner disposition to listen to the disclosure of being which could be related to Dr. Cyril Desbruslais' vision of life 'fully human and fully alive'. Heidegger is urging us to think deeply and radically to be freed from the clutches of practical and calculative thinking in our hyperactive society to emancipatory meditative thinking. Such a lifestyle leads to human flourishing and authenticity for contemporary human beings.

*Keywords:* Alienation, calculative thinking, Ek-sistence, Meditative thinking, Flight from thinking, Poetic dwelling, Releasement.

One of the best Experiences I've had since coming to Pune is meeting Dr. Cyril Desbruslais (popularly known as Cyril as he prefers to be called). My admiration for him began in 2011 when I was a young student at De Nobili College (DNC), pursuing a bachelor's degree in Philosophy. My first impression of Cyril was sheer admiration for the kind of person he was. What struck me was his complete and dedicated commitment to various apostolates. At that time, Cyril was the Director (Superior) of the Students of Philosophy at DNC. His approach was radically different: He genuinely inspired us to seek conviction in our Jesuit vocation and get involved with our ministries by using all our talents and creativity. At Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), he conducted a number of courses for which I was most fortunate to attend. The enrichment I experienced will no doubt last me a lifetime! His clarity of thought and his ability to articulate them made him one of the most popular and beloved professors on the campus!

Among the various courses Cyril was offering at JDV, "Philosophy of Liberation" stands out as one of my favourite subjects. It revealed his intellectual depth, highlighting his radical and critical dimensions about life

and reality. He brings out his liberative vision of life more creatively and effectively in the subjects he taught at JDV and other places or through his Annual Plays with the SSU! In his room at DNC, there hung on the wall an upside down quote which read, “But we’ve always done it this way”. This accurately sums up the kind of person he is, one who can think otherwise in bringing about a change in the hearts and minds of people to grow into ‘fully human and fully alive’. Cyril has truly been a source of inspiration for all who encountered him, the biggest beneficiaries being the Students of JDV and the Youth of SSU.

I admire Cyril immensely for his multi-tasking abilities; I have witnessed from close quarters his remarkable availability for various engagements throughout the year, be it academic commitments at JDV and other places, his availability for the students of DNC for varied tasks, SSU youth ministry activities including its time-consuming annual SSU play, the weekly bible classes in the city, to name some of them. Besides, he always found time for reading books and novels (a compulsive reader as once he told me about his reading habit). Moreover, I found him always on time for everything (most often waiting for people because of his rigid punctuality). Once I quizzed him about his mantra for time management, he casually replied “There is a time for everything and everything in its time”. Of course, he had time for everything and he did everything amazingly well in his own unique way.

What I also admire about Cyril is that despite his age and physical challenge, he is able to effectively lead a very busy life and makes it all look very easy! In the midst of various hectic activities throughout the year, he is amazingly well-organised. I heard people saying that he is gifted with many such remarkable qualities. However, what strikes me most is his rootedness in spirituality. All his apostolic commitments flow from here like a running stream. Cyril has the unique

ability to be available for all his commitments and yet remain deeply rooted in life. It is not possible to be deeply committed, unless you are genuinely connected to your inner core. I consider this singular quality as something special of Cyril and he does it so effortlessly.

This attitude of being in touch with oneself in the midst of various activities poses a challenge for contemporary society. People lose their focus and get carried away from their busy life schedule and as a consequence get disconnected from their true selves. In this regard, I present in this paper, *Meditative Thinking and Poetic Dwelling*, which investigates the reasons behind the plight of contemporary humans and spells out the conception of meditative thinking after the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

Martin Heidegger, the German Philosopher, is considered as one of the major forces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of European thought. His was a strange, but a very important and significant, concern in philosophical search. This rare and strange preoccupation makes him a real heuristic thinker who thought out-side the box and paved the way to question the fact of being. Traditional western philosophy, spanning nearly 2,500 years, was concerned about beings (the noun aspect) but had forgotten to question the verb being itself. What was forgotten in more than two millennia has affected humanity and this has resulted in a state of thoughtlessness. Thus it has become a central preoccupation for Heidegger to address it. To turn to the act of being makes him in a way an anti-traditionalist, i.e. he turned away from the traditional concerns, methods, concepts and their underlying assumptions. And what he discovered from his up-side down approach was a groundbreaking work and he left an indelible legacy behind. Few

heuristic thinkers, such as Heidegger, who have created such a radical disturbance in the history of philosophy!

It has been my long-cherished desire to study what such a heuristic philosopher like Heidegger has to say about our thinking itself. His famous memorial address, on October 30, 1955, in honour of 175 birthday of the German Composer and a native of his region, Conradin Kreutzer, entitled '*Discourse on Thinking*'<sup>1</sup> is a disclosure in this regard. It deeply reflects his concern for the essence of human thinking and, in particular his call for meditative thinking. Also, his '*Letter on Humanism*'<sup>2</sup> is a classic which delves deeply and elaborates in detail the essence of human thinking. Based principally on these sources, this paper explores the poverty of thinking of contemporary humans because of the onslaught of the traditional metaphysics.

## **1. Calculative Thinking of Contemporary Humans and the Alienation**

While addressing the gathering in honour of Conradin Kreutzer, Heidegger, at the outset, begins his memorial address with a question that challenges his audience; he finds fault with the way the celebration is organised, reducing such a memorial to the mere playing and singing some of the works of the composer, Conradin Kreutzer; because that is the way memorial celebrations are organised everywhere. Heidegger finds much discomfort with such a prevalent culture that people are not urged to think deeply enough and they end up being just too practical, choosing an easy way out. Taking a cue from there, he digs deeper into the core issue with this generation who are thought-poor and thought-less. Thoughtlessness, as he writes, is an uncanny visitor who comes and goes everywhere in today's world.<sup>3</sup>

Heidegger gives a critical analysis for the root cause for this kind of human *flight from thinking*<sup>4</sup>, as thinking has become merely practical and calculative. Thinking has become just an instrument of education as a classroom matter and a cultural concern. As a result, language also has become a mere means of objectification. This kind of representational thinking, to objectify unconditionally everything, is the result, as Heidegger points out, of the traditional metaphysics; because this kind of thinking does not permit us to go deeper into the fact of being of the beings. Right from the time of pre-Socrates, the philosophers have failed to account this ontological ground of being. Philosophy as metaphysics had forgotten its primary task, and as a result thinking about being and the truth of being is forgotten in and through metaphysics. And this long tradition of metaphysics was obsessed by contemporary humans so badly that the act of very thinking and language has become mere servants of communication.

As a result, this threatened the very essence of humanity; because for Heidegger, the human person at the core of his being has the capacity to think. He details at length this unique position of human person which distinguishes from other beings. The human person is the only being which is concerned about his being and that makes a human as a unique and special way of being in the world. But from the time of Aristotle, human beings are conceived as being only rational animals. After Immanuel Kant, the human being is seen as a rational and autonomous being. But the human person is much more than that, not just a being among other beings. Heidegger points out that giving attributes to humans such as spirit, mind, soul etc. is the manner of traditional metaphysics. As a matter of fact, the question of being itself suppressed in this way, along with

its ontological difference between being and beings; and it has been fixed by other metaphysical interpretations. As a result, what is nearer than the nearest for the humans, i.e. the truth of being, is pushed away to farther than the farthest.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, this kind of metaphysical thinking has entrapped human person to conceive oneself just another being among beings.

Now what sets off human person from other beings is his ek-sistence which is his unique openness to the self-showing or disclosure of being. Heidegger describes this state of being-in-the-world as only proper to the human person. And most importantly, the proper way of human thinking arises from this unique relation to being. That is the essence of human thinking as Heidegger writes, *“Only from that claim “has” he found that wherein his essence dwells. Only from this dwelling does he “have” “language” as the home that preserves the ecstatic for his essence. Such standing in the clearing of being I call the ek-sistence of human beings. This way of being is proper only to the human being.”*<sup>6</sup> In the ek-static openness, being discloses itself, and its truth is appropriated by the human being by listening to it. For Heidegger, it is thinking which brings the essence of humans into relation with being and it is precisely the poetic language which maintains this relation with being.<sup>7</sup> Humans living ecstatically amidst the truth of being become the core argument for Heidegger’s understanding of humanism.

Moreover, this ek-sistence should not be confused with the traditional metaphysical notion of existence. Heidegger explains in detail, in his *Letter on Humanism*, that ek-sistence is fundamentally contrasted to existence of the traditional metaphysics as he writes, *‘The ecstatic essence of human being consists in ek-sistence which is different from metaphysically conceived existentia.’*<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, existence is the realisation of something that is as it appears in its Idea. This kind of traditional metaphysical determinations ‘existence and

essence' has dominated the entire Western Philosophy for a long time. Medieval Philosophy considered existence as actuality. Kant termed it as actuality in the sense of objectivity of the experience. For Hegel, it is the self-knowing Idea of absolute subjectivity and Nietzsche termed it as the eternal recurrence of the same. But Heidegger's insight of ek-sistence is totally different from this kind of traditional metaphysical determinations. The ek-static dwelling of humans is the humanism that realises the proper dignity of the human person: "*It is a humanism that thinks the humanity of the human being from nearness to being.*"<sup>9</sup>

But the calculative thinking reduces the capacity of human person to just mere mechanical and less creative in their endeavours. The point in case for Heidegger is that calculative thinking never stops, as if machines do, and never collects itself (loss of reflective thinking) just racing from one prospect to the next.<sup>10</sup> It is here that Heidegger makes a crucial observation that science and technology adds more to the growing thoughtlessness of contemporary man, taking humans away from their unique ek-static dwelling. Though we are living in the age of Science and technology with its tremendous success in many fields, we have as consequence ended up being slaves to technology; as a result, we behave like machines and we lose touch with ourselves, our depth of being. Losing touch with the core of our being, that which determines us humans, is the key issue of this crisis of thoughtlessness which dehumanises the contemporary human person.

As a matter of fact, this state of flight from thinking of contemporary humans has resulted in a state of homelessness – being away from the core of one's being: "*Homelessness so understood consists in the abandonment*



*of beings by being. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of being. Because of it the truth of being remains unthought.”*<sup>11</sup> This state of brokenness is dehumanising as the alienation touches the very essence that constitutes that what is human itself. It is the challenge of contemporary humans to resonate with Heidegger’s thoughts if our thinking does not account deeply the truth of being. The saddest part is that contemporary humans are not even aware of this state of alienation as they are conditioned by the technical interpretation of thinking. Here at this plight of contemporary humans, Heidegger proposes an alternative way of thinking that paves the way back to the truth of being.

## **2. Meditative Thinking and Poetic Dwelling**

How can we relate to Science and technology without losing our inner and real core? What type of thinking is needed to realise human’s worth and his true potential? It is the awakening of the meditative thinking that Heidegger proposes as the alternative to the mechanical calculative thinking. Essentially, man is thinking, that is, a meditative being.<sup>12</sup> He quotes a poem from Johann Peter Hebel to describe the state of meditative thinking: “*We are plants which- whether we like to admit it to ourselves or not- must with our roots rise out of the earth in order to bloom in the ether and to bear fruit.*”<sup>13</sup> The image of the plant in the poem emphasises the rootedness, being in touch with the core of its being. Unlike calculative thinking, meditative thinking permits us to stay rooted always in our human ek-static essence and branch out to bear much fruit in our endeavours. Meditative thinking is all about this rootedness in ‘*our life-giving homeland*’<sup>14</sup> of human uniqueness.

Our relation to the world and to technology needs to stem from this rootedness of our thinking. It is to be noted that Heidegger is not against science and technology itself but he is concerned

about our relation to them. We should not be encircled by the forces of technology. Then we lose touch with ourselves and that disturb our meditative thinking. To remedy such a dangerous position of being carried away from our meditative thinking, Heidegger proposes that our relation to technology be proper and balanced. He wants that our relation to technology to become wonderfully simple and relaxed, which does not affect our inner and real core.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, he uses a technical term '*releasement toward things and openness to the mystery*'<sup>16</sup> which, to put it in simple terms, is an inner disposition to listen to the voice of being. It is in a way a step-back approach to muse over being, "*The stance of man seems almost a devotional passivity which will be completely open to the voice of being.*"<sup>17</sup> But at this passive openness to being, being discloses itself more and more what was hidden. Calculative thinking does not give us this inner disposition, but meditative thinking allows us this balanced state of relating to the technology. Heidegger emphasises that his proposed stance of releasement toward things and openness to the mystery does not befall us accidentally but only through persistent and courageous thinking.<sup>18</sup>

In the same line of thinking of meditative thinking, Heidegger quotes Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>19</sup> to clarify that poetic composition is truer than explorations of being, because the former is claimed by being, guided by being, and its task is to bring being into language.<sup>20</sup> He invites humans to be poetic dwellers who meditate being. In the same vein of thought, Heidegger gives another instance that Aristotle reports from the life of Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher. Some strangers wanted to pay a visit to Heraclitus, but upon their arrival, they were surprised to

see that Heraclitus was warming himself at a stove. To their wonderment, Heraclitus invites them to come in with the following words, “*For here too the gods are present.*”<sup>21</sup> The significance of the instance is that the strangers thought that a great philosopher must be busy doing something great. But Heraclitus taught them that we need to muse over the ordinary and common activities of our life. Meditative thinking gifts us with such an inner disposition to be present intensively to the familiar everydayness of our life, and listen to the voice of being of the ordinary instances.

## **Conclusion**

‘*Discourse on thinking*’ of Heidegger is one of his deep concerns for contemporary humans. The seriousness of his concern is summed up in his words, “*The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.*” It is at this background of his deep observation of contemporary humans that he wants us not to lose our essential nature by the onslaught of science and technology. It is very true that his genuine concern is much more relevant today than when he made the discourse about 65 years ago in 1955. Today technology is enjoying unprecedented success in its history, and its success is going to be increasingly on the rise; the danger of being swayed by its almost omnipresent presence in every sphere of human endeavours must serve as a wake-up call for everyone not to lose their rootedness of thinking.

Having said this, it has to be reemphasised that Heidegger is not against the technological advancements, but rather he is concerned about our relation to science and technology. He would like to have the relation as that of simplicity and relaxedness but at the same time what is near, as Heidegger warns us, for this is always the longest and the hardest for humans.<sup>22</sup> Only persistent deeper thinking could bring us to the

awareness of our thoughtlessness and the danger it presents to contemporary humans.

The seriousness of Heidegger's concern is that humans are to be rooted in their essence where meditative thinking is an integral part of their nature. Failing to be in touch with this inner and real core of our nature makes us to be in the state of alienation and homelessness. Calculative thinking is the product of the brokenness to be in touch with our inner core of human essence at the expense of our meditative thinking. The former makes the humans thought-poor whereas the latter gifts us the inner disposition to listen to the disclosure of being. The lifestyle of the contemporary generation is too busy and hyperactive; it becomes a huge challenge to have that sense of pondering and wondering at reality. Discourse on thinking is aimed at inviting contemporary humans to contemplate the mystery of being. It is dwelling at this mystery of being that gives new ground and foundation for creativity for producing lasting works to strike new roots.<sup>23</sup> This enables human flourishing and authenticity for contemporary human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. Anderson & Freund (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. Frank A. Capuzzi in William McNeill (ed.), *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Letter on Humanism, p. 253.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> James Luchte, "Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' - A Reading," [https://www.academia.edu/6049524/Heideggers\\_Letter\\_on\\_Humanism\\_A\\_Reading](https://www.academia.edu/6049524/Heideggers_Letter_on_Humanism_A_Reading), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Letter on Humanism, p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Discourse on Thinking, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969) p. 149.

<sup>18</sup> Discourse on thinking, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Letter on Humanism, p. 275.

<sup>20</sup> James Luchte, "Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' - A Reading," p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Letter on Humanism, p. 270.

<sup>22</sup> Discourse on thinking, p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

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