



"Ontological difference" and the two truths

This paper argues for the usefulness of comparative philosophy in exploring areas of contention within Buddhology. For the German philosopher Martin Heidegger the difference between being as such (Being) and beings is critical. He calls this difference the "ontological difference" and argues that Western metaphysics has gone astray both in its understanding of Being (which makes any particular being possible) and in regard to the nature of beings (or things) because of failure to appreciate the significance of this difference. The distinction Heidegger makes parallels in many respects the distinction between the "two truths" central to Madhyamika Buddhism. The Madhyamikas distinguish absolute truth (*paramarthasatya*), the truth of emptiness or no-thingness (*sunyata*), and the relative or conventional truth (*samvrtisatya*). How the difference between these two truths is understood determines our understanding of both *sunyata* and the status of things. This paper takes it as axiomatic that *sunyata* is a contested term among Buddhists and Buddhist scholars even when its application is restricted to Madhyamika. The paper will explore what light Heidegger's distinction may throw on discussions within Buddhist traditions and Buddhology on the nature of *sunyata* and the two truths and will concentrate, in line with Heidegger, on the significance of the difference between them.