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FOUR-DIMENSIONAL TIME IN DZOGCHEN AND HEIDEGGER

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Time is flying. The passage of time is usually viewed as a negative thing that brings us closer to death. To the conventional mind, it seems that we are moving ever forward, from a definite past into an uncertain future. The past is over; it is unchangeable, and in a certain sense it is "out there." The future, on the other hand, seems yet undetermined. It could turn out to be one thing or another. We often feel ourselves to be helpless spectators as the scope of the determined past edges its way into an uncertain future.

As time passes, we sadly realize that we are mortal and that there is a definite end to our lives. For this very reason, some may strive to maintain a longer life in this world, while others may imagine an eternal life in another world. Concerning time, we have many puzzles to contend with, such as what eternity is, how it is related to the passage of time, whether the passage of time is irreversible, whether things past are now no-longer, whether the future is unpredictable, whether or not the present exists, and so on.

The present article is an attempt to discuss such experiences of the passage of time. Among numerous individuals who have been pondering this mundane but nonetheless serious issue, I single out two: Longchenpa (1308–1363), who represents the Dzogchen tradition of Tantric Buddhism, and Heidegger (1889–1976), who represents the School of Phenomenology in the West. Instead of speculating on an eternal life, both of them attempt to look into the very phenomenon and experience of the passage of time and reveal to us a new dimension of time, the so-called fourth time or fourth dimension of time.

This article will proceed in four sections. In the first section, I will introduce a Buddhist practice in the Dzogchen tradition that deals with the experience of the passage of time. In the second section, Longchenpa's concept of four times (*dus-bzhi*) will be analyzed and its significance for the history of Buddhism discussed. In the third section, I will examine Heidegger's concept of four-dimensional time and briefly discuss its elaboration by later philosophers. In conclusion, I will discuss the similarities and differences between the four-dimensional time theories as found in these two diverse traditions and the possible reasons for their striking similarities.

A Dzogchen Practice

Buddhist philosophy is not the product of purely intellectual speculation, but rather relies heavily on practice and experience. In the Buddhist view, any theory or concept has to be drawn from and applicable to meditative practice, what is not being

considered empty speculation. In this interaction between knowledge and practice, one gains the wisdom to see into reality.

The following is an example of such a practical instruction in the Dzogchen tradition. In *The Mirror: Advice on the Presence of Awareness*, Namkhai Norbu, a contemporary Dzogchen master, gives the following advice to practitioners:

The recognition of our true State and the continuation of its presence really is the essence of all paths, the basis of all meditation, the conclusion of all practices, the path of all the secret methods, and the key to all the deeper teachings. This is why it is vitally important that we seek out our way to maintain continuous presence without being pulled off course.

This means: not hanging on to the past, not going after the future, and, without letting ourselves get involved in the illusory thoughts arising in the present moment, turning inwards and observing our own mind, leaving it in its true State beyond the limitations of past, present and future. Without letting ourselves be conditioned by contaminating conceptualization, without passing judgment on the State itself, whether indeed it even exists, whether it will turn out to be positive or negative, etc., we must stay focused in this authentic condition and not try to correct it.

Although the primordial State of total perfection is completely beyond the limits of past, present and future, one is not immediately aware of this and indeed has difficulty in recognizing it when first starting to practice, and therefore it is important to be on the alert against distraction by thoughts of the “three times.”¹

This is an instruction on how to maintain one’s “true State.” To keep one’s mind in this true state, one must not be distracted by thoughts of the three times. To do this, one must not hang on to the past, go after the future, or get entangled in the present moment. This is the key to meditative practice. According to the instruction, the past is no-longer, and one should not follow it; the future has not yet arrived, and one should not anticipate it; the present is momentary, and one should not dwell on it. This practice is an antidote to our ordinary experience. In our everyday life, we either live in our memories of the past, anticipate the future, or hold on to the present moment. It seems that this is the only way that we can appreciate the value of time, and live a meaningful life during the passage of time. If there is no past, present, or future to hold on to, how can we live on?

The Dzogchen master answers: “Relax.” Compared to many poets who burst into tears upon realizing the emptiness of the passage of time, the Dzogchen master is more skillful and firm in teaching how to deal with this difficult situation. It is actually the very goal of Buddhist practice to see through the passage of time and to realize the very nature of reality beyond the momentary and impermanent. Here “relax” not only means to take it easy; it is also the key to practice: let it be. Namkhai Norbu points out that “Dzogchen could be defined as a way to relax completely. This can be clearly understood from the terms used to denote the state of contemplation, such as ‘leave it just as it is’ (*cog.bzhag*), ‘cutting loose one’s tension’ (*khregs.chod*), ‘beyond effort’ (*rtsol.bral*), and so on.”²

With respect to the past, present, and future, one may find it easier to start with giving up anticipation of the future by making no effort to achieve spiritual

attainment. Then one can cut off memory of the past by negating the self to be the agent of past deeds. This way one can experience the emptiness of “no-longer” and “not-yet.” In this experience, there may still be some thoughts arising moment by moment, and eradicating them is the hardest part of the practice. Since the moment of thought is always in the present, in the sense that it is here and now, it is very difficult in practice not to dwell on the present, not to get involved in present thoughts, and to let them be. According to Namkhai Norbu’s instruction, one should leave these thoughts just as they are without getting sidetracked, forgetting, or letting oneself get wrapped up in them.

It is in the non-dwelling of the past, present, and future that the true state of one’s mind arises. This state, also called the primordial state of total perfection, is the state completely beyond the limits of the past, present, and future. And the goal of the meditative practice is to relax, that is, to be free from the distractions of thoughts of the “three times,” and to maintain the presence of the authentic state. Relaxation and realization are thus two sides of a coin; as Namkhai Norbu says: “When the mind is naturally released and present, it comes to itself in its authentic State.”³ Now the question remains: why have a positive attitude toward the present? Why let the mind or its authentic state involve itself in the present—why not just let it go as illusory thought? How do you keep its presence without being reduced to grasping the present, that is, the “here and now”?

I feel that by “to remain present and relaxed” Namkhai Norbu means to maintain the presence of the natural, authentic state of perfection. “Present” here means to let it “be present,” inferring a dynamic process of presenting. It is not a dwelling on the static here and now; rather it is a continuous effort and activity to maintain “presence.” This is like a rowboat heading downstream. The rower cannot exert himself, but he has to maintain a certain direction so that the boat does not run aground, but moves with the flow of the water. At this point, a distinction between two senses of “present” by Masao Abe, a Zen scholar, is helpful. One is the relative present, considered to stand side by side or parallel with the past and future, and the other is the absolute present that embraces past, present, and future as their more fundamental basis.⁴

Therefore, we have to keep in mind that, to follow the teaching of the recognition of our true state and the continuation of its presence, “[t]he point is not to regard the movement as a negative thing, something to be rejected.”⁵ In a traditional Buddhist context, however, it is rather difficult to appreciate a dynamic sense of presence and to treat it positively. This is because tranquillity is generally considered to be superior to movement, and one who achieves *nirvāṇa* is said to eliminate all activities. In this sense, Dzogchen and, for that matter, Zen are unique in taking movement into account.

In meditative practice, when a momentary thought arises, an authentic state of calm is seen to arise side by side with it, so the key is not to be conditioned by thought, and yet not to pass judgment on it—that is, to consider whether or not its object exists, or whether it is positive or negative. One thought may disappear in a certain period of time, and another will then arise without interruption. This is what

is called “movement.” In the Dzogchen tradition it is necessary to learn to work with this movement. Movement and calmness or tranquillity are seen to be two aspects of one state, and the movement of thought to be the functioning of the state of clarity. When one is actually in meditation, in the state of pure presence, there is no difference between the calm state and movement. Thus, there is no need for one to seek a state that is without thought; rather one should just maintain one and the same state of presence in one’s experience. As Garab Dorje says: “If there does arise [the movement of thoughts], be aware of the state in which they arise. If one is free of thoughts, be aware of the state in which one is free of them. Then there is no difference between the arising of thought and being free of it.”⁶ Only by not-judging and letting-be can one maintain the authentic state of perfection, which is both of movement and of tranquillity. As Namkhai Norbu points out: “‘To meditate’ only means to keep presence both of the state of calm and of that of movement: there is nothing on which to meditate.”⁷

Then how is this true state, which is beyond the past, present, and future, related to time? Is it totally different from time or only another dimension of time? Namkhai Norbu does not state this clearly. But in emphasizing its movement, he tends to take it to be part of time and yet be beyond the “three times” in the conventional sense. By tracing back to the early Dzogchen tradition, I found a better term for it: “timeless time” or the “fourth time.”

The Four Times

Longchenpa, or Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa, was an eminent Dzogchen master and adept of the Nyingmapa School. He is one of Tibet’s most celebrated writers, and in his relatively short life he produced an enormous number of works, amounting to two hundred and seventy titles. Throughout these works, he reveals himself as an independent and original thinker, though, in support of his own brilliant expositions, he quotes from the vast literature that had already developed during the early phase of Buddhism in Tibet. The notion of the “four times” (*dus-bzhi*) is one of the most interesting ideas I have found in his extensive output.

In his *Naturally Liberated Mind, the Great Perfection (Mahāsandhicittatāsvamutki-nāma, rDzogs-Pa Ch'en-Po Sems-Nyid Rang-Grol)*, while elaborating on the epithet of *Sambhogakāya*, which includes the pure Buddha-Land, the *maṇḍala*, the Teachers of Five Classes, Primordial Wisdom, retinues of disciples, and so on, Longchenpa brings up the notion of the four times. He states the third and fifth epithets to be as follows:

(3) . . . the self-precept retinues of disciples of the ten directions and four times. (Translator’s note reads “*Dus-bZhi*: past, present, future and timeless time.”)

(5) The three times and timeless time is *Kuntu Zangpo* time, And it is the originally accomplished and changeless state.⁸

The phrase “ten directions and four times” (*phyogs-bchu dus-bzhi*) is found in some Tantric literature.⁹ The ten directions include east, south, west, north,

northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest, zenith, and nadir. The four times, as indicated in the passage quoted above, are the past, present, future, and timeless time. Some commentators take this to mean four aeons, namely the Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, and Kali Yugas.¹⁰ This, however, is in contrast to the standard notion of the “three times,” which is established in the Abhidharma tradition and used throughout the subsequent history of Buddhist literature.¹¹ The additional time may be the contribution of the general appreciation of quaternity in the Tantric tradition, which, again, may have its origin in an earlier source.

The fourth time is called no-time, timeless time, Kuntu Zangpo time, state of Kuntu Zangpo, or Samantabhadra time. Among these various names, Kuntu Zangpo or its Sanskrit equivalent, Samantabhadra, is a very loaded term in the Dzogchen tradition. It refers to the Buddha of the same name, and is considered to be the symbol of Dharmakāya,¹² while in Bon teachings it refers to Sambhogakāya.¹³ According to Guenther, the expression Kuntu Zangpo “is synonymous with *rig-pa*, the cognition of being *qua* being, or a value-sustained cognition having a strongly aesthetic character.”¹⁴

To introduce the idea of the four times, Longchenpa starts with the experience of the three times. Like Namkhai Norbu, he expresses his experience of the past, present, and future in terms of “ceased,” “not-lingering,” and “not yet coming,” respectively:

Past—it [i.e., mind] has ceased; future—it has not yet come into existence;
Present—it does not linger. It is neither within nor without nor anywhere.
Know it to be like the sky and immune to propositions about it.¹⁵

It is interesting to note that Longchenpa’s understanding of the present to be not-lingering is different from that of traditional Indian Buddhism. Vasubandhu, in his early Abhidharma and later Yogācāra writings, gives a consistent definition of the three times:

[T]he time periods and the conditions are established through the operation of the activity [of] a *dharma*: when a *dharma* does not accomplish its operation, it is future; when it is accomplishing it, it is present; and when its operation has come to an end, it is past.¹⁶

Among these definitions, the future as “not accomplishing” and the past as “coming to an end” are similar to Longchenpa’s notions of “not yet coming” and “ceased.” But as for the present, Vasubandhu understands it to mean “be accomplishing,” while Longchenpa holds it to be “not-lingering.” By the same token, this view is different from Nāgārjuna’s understanding the present to be “what is arising here and now (*pratyutpanna*).”¹⁷ At this point, Longchenpa comes closer to the notion of three times held among Japanese Buddhists and mentioned by Dōgen in the following passage:

[A common belief] says that the past life has already perished, the future is yet to come, and the present does not stay. The past did not necessarily already perish, the future is not inevitably yet to come, and the present is not inexorably impermanent. If you learn the not-staying, the not-yet, and the no-longer as present, future, and past, respectively, you

should certainly understand the reason that the not-yet is the past, present, and future. [The same holds true of the no-longer and the not-staying.]¹⁸

Here Dōgen is sophisticated enough to go further than what he calls the “common belief” of three times, which is held by Longchenpa. Examining this carefully, though, one will find that Dōgen is not really against this common notion, but is rather trying to emphasize the interpenetration of the three times, which obviously bears the mark of the Huayan way of thinking. In a similar way, Longchenpa, by taking this notion of three times into account, seeks to bring out a further dimension of time.

In the quotation above from Longchenpa, the mind is seen to have ceased activity in the past, not yet come to existence in the future, and does not linger in the present, and thus it cannot be located in any of the three times. For this reason, it is empty like the sky, and one cannot have any conception of it. This is one aspect of mind’s nature. On the other hand, Longchenpa says that it is wrong to search for the mind either in the past, the present, or the future, for it is always there, “naturally remaining identical with itself.” This self-existence, like emptiness, is beyond any conception. Thus, one should not be “seeking mind by mind.” Rather, one should relax, let oneself be, and thus let the mind be. This is beautifully put by Longchenpa:

It is not in the has-been, nor is it on the side of the not-yet;
It is not in a now, but is a state naturally remaining identical with itself;
Instead of seeking mind by mind, let be.¹⁹

After one regains his true mind by relaxing and letting words, thoughts, and talk pass by, then how is this mind related to time? Is it simply beyond time? Longchenpa says the mind can be seen as the “time” that remains when one transcends the three times. In other words, when past, present, and future are not time, the mind or pristine cognitiveness is itself time:

This self-existing pristine cognitiveness, (evoked through) the Guru’s sustaining power,
Is seen when words and thoughts and talk have passed away.
To see it then as time
Is (the moment) when the three aspects of time are no-time, and a “before” or a “later”
can no longer be distinguished.
It is called Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamika,
Zhi-byed, calming (the rush of) propositions and suffering, Mahāmudrā,
rDzogs-chen, the very meaningfulness of meaningfulness.²⁰

Here Longchenpa does not show us in detail how the three times are no-time. The key point for him seems to be the making of no distinction between before and after. Moreover, he attributes this view to various traditions in the history of Buddhism, such as Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamika, Zhi-byed, Mahāmudrā, and rDzogs-chen. Among these teachings, Nāgārjuna’s argument that the three times are no-time can be singled out to be representative. The very point of this argument is that time cannot be conceived of as an entity existing independently of temporal phenomena, but must itself be regarded as a set of relations among them. That is, the

only mode of existence that time has is as a set of relations among empirical phenomena, or as the provisional distinction of before and after. Apart from these relations and distinctions, there is no time.²¹

Since the existence of the three times is based on the provisional distinction of before and after, if there is no such distinction, then there is no time in the conventional sense. But the state of mind or cognitiveness is seen to be a “time” in the sense that there are no temporal distinctions or separations, which makes this time different from the three times that are based on provisional distinctions. Longchenpa says:

In the simultaneity of rising and being free, one is free from all emotions;
Having gone beyond subjective ideas, one engages in this very reach and range of
calm and peace,
In the vortex of meaningfulness, when the three aspects of time do not exist as time—
As in a phantom, not introducing any break in time.²²

One distinct feature of the Dzogchen teaching is that it still names the state of no-time as a time or real time. And the concept of timeless time is unique in the history of Buddhism. In the early Buddhist literature, there is the notion of the “timeless” (*akālika*) in reference to the unconditional state, but not that of “timeless time.”²³ The Abhidharma tradition makes a clear distinction and contrast between the three times and the timeless, or the conditional reality and unconditional space and *nirvāṇa*. In this tradition, space is superior to time, and cessation (*nirodha*) is preferable to action. Time, being a mark of the profane world, can never be considered in terms of eternity. In his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu indicates such a distinction by saying “the conditioned *dharmas* of the three time periods are *kāraṇahetu*; the unconditioned *dharmas* are outside of time.”²⁴

Nāgārjuna, as I mentioned earlier, takes time to be a derived notion, and it is only valid in the conventional sense. At the ultimate level, there is neither past, present, nor future. To show that time only exists as a derived notion, Nāgārjuna argues that “in the teachings of the Buddha mostly *samaya* is used and it is only rarely that *kāla* is used.”²⁵ The distinction between *samaya* and *kāla* by Nāgārjuna shows that Indian Buddhist scholars in general are arguing against the view held by other Indian philosophical schools, such as Jainism, Vaiśeṣika, and Nyāya, which takes time to be an all-pervading, partless substance.²⁶ And the term *kāla* is heavily loaded with this substantialist sense, while Buddhism from its very beginning has attacked such a substantial way of thinking with its fundamental doctrines of no-self, impermanence, and *nirvāṇa*. As a result, it has become a taboo in the Buddhist tradition to appreciate time in the sense of an all-pervasive dynamic reality. Instead, time is only treated as a mark of the impermanent, profane conditioned world.

The first attempt to attack such a taboo can be seen in the *Milindapañha*, a sūtra of early Buddhism, where the distinction is made between the “time that exists” and the “time that does not.”²⁷ Here one gets a hint that time that does not exist could in a certain sense be referring to timeless time. But the text goes on to say that the root of time is ignorance, and that liberation results from an evolution from the time that

exists to the time that does not. This way, time is again categorized according to the dualistic distinction of conditional and unconditional realities.

To break down the barrier between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the conditional and the unconditional world, is one of the major aims of the Mahāyāna school. However, so far as the issue of time is concerned, they still take no-time to be superior to time and do not really appreciate time in the sense of dynamic movement. This situation did not change until the Dzogchen tradition brought together time and the timeless, allowing the timeless to penetrate into time. Having its origin in Tathāgata-garbha thought, the Dzogchen program is to keep dynamic movement in its scope. As Guenther points out: "What distinguishes rDzogs-chen thinking from all other modes of thought is that it is pure process thinking."²⁸ The Buddha nature is considered to be all pervasive and creatively transforming the conditional world, which is categorized by the three times. The key here is to appreciate not only its all-pervasive nature but also its creative action of transformation. This inevitably leads to a reinterpretation and redefinition of terms that are otherwise commonly used in the predominantly static way in which ordinary language is structured.

The concept of timeless time opens up a new dimension in the Buddhist worldview. The reason that the Dzogchen tradition still calls the timeless a "time" is that it takes both time and the timeless to be of the same nature of dynamic transformation. The no-time or fourth time is as dynamic as the three times. This is not only experienced in one's mind but also can be extended to the whole realm of existence. As Guenther says: "This meaning-rich gestalt dynamics is always and everywhere present, pervading everything from the highest imaginable reality (*Kun-tu bzang-po*) down to the smallest louse."²⁹ Actually the timeless time is itself called by Longchenpa Kuntu Zangpo or Samantabhadra, which equates to the highest reality:

The primordially empty Mind, which has no root,
Is not defiled by the phenomenal appearance of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.
Throughout the three times and timeless time, the state of *Kunzu Zangpo*,
The essence of the changeless perfection at the basis is
Undeified by the appearances of the six objects, like the water-moon
[the moon's reflection in water].³⁰

Furthermore, he says:

The time is not a determinate event, but the ground (Being-as-such) being complete
and not altering (position) or changing.
Samantabhadra time, in which the three aspects of time are timeless,
The overruling prereflectively experienced meaning in which everything is complete
and alike,
Is a reach and range pure in itself from the very beginning.³¹

To describe the highest reality, Longchenpa adopts terms such as "the primordially empty Mind," "no-root," "not defiled by *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*," "changeless," "perfection," "the basis," "the ground," "complete," "not altering," "not changing," "pure," "in itself," and so on. In Tibetan a single term *gzhi* (**āśraya*) is used to denote this reality. Literally meaning "ground" or "basis," *gzhi* is usually translated as

“reason,” “the whole,” or “Being.” According to the Dzogchen teaching, this reality is purely dynamic, and its creative, dynamic nature ensures that it is never “at rest.” “This ‘never-being-at-rest’ expresses itself in a complementarity that . . . is imaged as Kun-tu bzang-po (the male aspect) and Kun-tu bzang-mo (the female aspect).”³²

In the Dzogchen tradition, Kuntu Zangpo and Kuntu Zangmo are usually represented as an image of a naked man and woman in intimate embrace. However, one should not stick to its anthropomorphic associations. The male Kuntu Zangpo symbolizes the principle of the lighting-up or coming-to-presence (*snang-cha*) of *gzhi*, and the female Kuntu Zangmo the principle of openness or nothingness (*stong-cha*). Their nakedness signifies that they are the purest of the pure, and no ornaments or drapery can interfere with their pure dynamics. And their intimate embrace symbolizes the complementarity or inseparability of these two principles.³³

Kuntu Zangpo, being the fourth dimension of time, does not stand outside *gzhi* or the highest reality, but is within the unfolding and presenting of the reality. In this process of unfolding, the space-like principle of openness or nothingness can make room for the dynamics of the highest reality to be possible. On the other hand, the principle of lighting-up or coming-to-presence as dynamic “activity” (*thabs*) shows the very nature of nothingness or openness. This dynamic process, called “creativity” (*rtsal*), “play” (*rol-pa*), or “ornament” (*rgyan*), reflects the inner dynamics and spontaneity or spontaneous givenness (*lhun-grub*) of *gzhi*.³⁴

This is called the self-organizing principle of the highest reality. And it is rather crucial whether one recognizes such a self-manifestation process as *gzhi* itself. If one does, one will be enlightened into the highest reality; “If, however, one does not recognize this auto-presencing of Being [*gzhi*] as an auto-presencing, this (failure) becomes the reason for going astray into the status of a mentation-governed (sentient) being (*sems-can*) within the three world spheres.”³⁵ That is, one will fall into the circle of *saṃsāra*.

To summarize, time in the Dzogchen understanding not only consists of three times of no-longer, not-yet, and no-dwelling, but also of a fourth Kuntu Zangpo time characterized by its coming-to-presence, which reveals the very nature of the highest reality, *gzhi*, which is self-presentation.

Four-dimensional Time

Among Western philosophers, Heidegger is one of the few who treats time seriously and brings it within the scope of metaphysics, thus breaking through the “‘gap’ between ‘temporal’ being and ‘supratemporal’ eternal being,”³⁶ which has remained a fundamental distinction throughout the history of Western philosophy. By taking time to be the only secret path to being, he has totally changed the outlook of traditional Western metaphysics in the sense that he brings change and dynamics into the dominant substantialist way of thinking.

Heidegger starts his metaphysical questioning of being with human existence, which he indicates by the use of the technical term *Dasein*. This usage has a direct source in the approach of the phenomenological movement, which focuses on one’s

immanent experience and thus avoids traditional dogmatism. Though Heidegger is critiqued for his anthropological turning in the circle of phenomenology, he still operates along the lines of phenomenology with the exception that he expands a Husserlian static perception to a living experience of human existence. In this sense, he comes closer to Buddhism, whose entire strategy is to experience, analyze, and transcend human existence.

As for the issue of time, Heidegger does not attempt to provide a metaphysical definition of time to begin with, but rather starts with temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) as the experience of human existence. In the experience of time, he challenges the conventional notions of the three times, and warns about keeping a distance from “all of the meanings of ‘future,’ ‘past,’ and ‘present’ initially urging themselves upon us from the vulgar concept of time.”³⁷ In his view, the vulgar concept of time arises from an inauthentic temporality or an inauthentic understanding of time, which is in contrast to the authentic temporality that he is exploring.

Continuing with his exploration of authentic temporality, Heidegger makes use of some new terminology. When he refers to “past” (*Vergangenheit*), he uses the term “having-been” (*Gewesenheit*). “Past,” literally what has passed away, is a “no-longer” as understood by Longchenpa and by Buddhism in general. To Heidegger, this is a vulgarity and hence an inauthentic understanding of the past. To differentiate himself from this understanding, he uses the word “having-been” to indicate the sense of the “already-being-in” of the past. For him, what is past is not “no-longer-now but earlier,” but, on the contrary, what he thinks of as “it is never past, but is always already *having-been* in the sense of ‘I-am-as-having-been.’”³⁸ This having-been brings one “back to” what has been happening, thus making it “a constituent of the ecstatic unity of the temporality of Da-sein.”³⁹ It is through this crucial distinction between “passing away” and “coming back” that Heidegger contrasts the ordinary usage of “the past” from what he calls “the having-been.” By the same token, Heidegger distinguishes the authentic and inauthentic understanding of having-been by the terms retrieve (*Wiederholen*) and forgottenness (*Vergessen*), respectively.

For the future, Heidegger does not pick up a new term. But the German word that he uses, *Zukunft*, is very different from the English “future,” which, like the German word *Futur*, denotes a chronological sense of “later time” and indicates a rather linear understanding of time. *Zukunft*, on the other hand, in German can mean *zukommen*, or to come, and *ankunft*, or to arrive, and an equivalence may be found in the Old English word “advent.” Therefore, the future is not denoted in a chronological sense of “not-yet-now,” but instead as “being-ahead-of-oneself.”⁴⁰ In anticipation of going ahead of oneself, one makes the future come toward itself. Thus, anticipation is seen to be the authentic mode of the future. On the other hand, awaiting, or passively longing for a future point of time, is considered to be inauthentic. Here it is interesting to notice that the anticipation of the future is seen to be an attachment in Buddhism, which would consider an authentic mode to be non-anticipation of the future.

Among the English words for the three times, the “present” best matches its German equivalence in Heidegger’s usage. The German word *Gegenwart* literally

means to be present in a certain place or event. It refers not only to physically bringing forth something, but also to calling up something in one's mind. Thus, the present is to "be present," that is, "letting something be encountered."⁴¹ This understanding denotes the present in an active sense in that one is always encountering or being-together-with something. Heidegger also distinguishes the authentic and inauthentic presents to be the moment (*Augenblick*) and making present (*Gegenwärtigen*), respectively. His understanding is that the moment being an authentic present "lets us encounter for the first time what can be 'in a time' as something at hand or objectively present,"⁴² while making present marks a general quality of the present, for "every present makes present, but not every present is 'in the moment.'"⁴³

While treating "making present" to be the inauthentic present, Heidegger does not distinguish the present (*Gegenwart*) from "presence" (*Anwesenheit*), and he uses the two terms interchangeably. This makes the phenomenon of the present more complicated. He says: "Presencing, presence speaks of the present [*Aus Anwesen, Anwesenheit spricht Gegenwart*]. According to current representations, the present, together with past and future, forms the character of time. Being is determined as presence by time."⁴⁴ This became a topic for Derrida, and he observes that in *Being and Time* and in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* it is difficult to distinguish rigorously between presence as *Anwesenheit* and presence as *Gegenwärtigkeit*, and in other works *Gegenwärtigkeit* becomes more and more a restriction of *Anwesenheit*.⁴⁵

Though not distinguishing the present and presencing or presence, Heidegger sharply contrasts the present to nowness (*Jetzt*), which is taken to be the key character in the vulgar concept of time. He thinks that "the present in the sense of presence differs so vastly from the present in the sense of the now that the present as presence can in no way be determined in terms of the present as the now. The reverse would rather seem possible."⁴⁶ The relationship between these three concepts can be summarized as follows: "Time is presencing as present: 'present' (*Gegenwart*) is nothing but presence (*Anwesenheit*), which cannot be determined in terms of the present as the now."⁴⁷ Heidegger thinks that the history of Western philosophy is dominated by this vulgar understanding of time:

For as soon as reflection on the essence of time began, at the *end* of Greek philosophy with Aristotle, time itself had to be taken as something somehow present, *ousia tis*. Consequently time was considered from the standpoint of "now," the actual moment. The past is the "no-longer-now," the future is the "not-yet-now."⁴⁸

In this vulgar understanding, time is a succession of nows uninterrupted and without gaps. No matter how far one divides the now, it is still always now. In this uninterrupted succession of nows, every now is already either a just now or a right-away. Heidegger points out:

If the characterization of time keeps primarily and exclusively to *this succession*, no beginning and no end can be found in principle in it as such. Every last now, *as a now*, is always *already* a right-away that is no-longer, thus it is time in the sense of the no-longer-

now, of the past. Every first now is always a just-now-not-yet, thus it is time in the sense of the not-yet-now, the “future.” Time is thus endless “in both directions.”⁴⁹

As a result, one has the one-dimensional linear time as experienced in ordinary life. This vulgar understanding can be characterized by its dwelling on nowness, which in the Buddhist view is again an attachment to be gotten rid of. Jean-Luc Marion confirms Heidegger’s observation by pointing out that “This ontological overdetermination of a primacy of the present leads to a double reduction of the future and of the past: the past finishes and the future begins as soon as the present begins or finishes. Their respective temporalities count only negatively, as a double nonpresent, even a double nontime.”⁵⁰ Here “the present” is used in the sense of “here and now.” The nowness cancels out past and future, thus leaving one attached to the static here and now.

To detach himself from the nowness or “objective present” (*Vorhandenheit*), Heidegger is in favor of a futural orientation: “the future has priority in the ecstatic unity of primordial and authentic temporality. . . . Primordial and authentic temporality temporalizes itself out of the authentic future, and indeed in such a way that, futurally having-been, it first arouses the present. *The primary phenomenon of primordial and authentic temporality is the future.*”⁵¹ This way, he takes possibility to be superior to actuality. In his view, human existence is always ahead of oneself and thus keeps an open horizon of being in the future. This possibility of moving toward the future also makes time itself dynamic and breaks the chain of nowness. Here it is interesting to notice that for the same purpose of transcending static time, Derrida is in favor of the past. His key concept *différance* is “a ‘past’ that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a production or a reproduction in the form of presence.”⁵²

Though the future has priority over the past and the present, in Heidegger’s view the three times interpenetrate each other. The present arises in the unity of the future and the having-been, and thus the horizon of a present temporalizes itself equiprimordially with those of the future and the having-been. The same is true with the past and the future. As Heidegger puts it: “Having-been arises from the future in such a way that the future that has-been (or better, is in the process of having-been) releases the present from itself. We call the unified phenomenon of the future that makes present in the process of having-been *temporality*.”⁵³ This temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) is a unity of motions of “toward,” “back to,” and “together with” that reveals itself to be an ecstatic moving out of itself. This picture of the interpenetration of the three times is very similar to the view of time in Dōgen and Huayan philosophy.

Though he discusses temporality in great detail, in *Being and Time* Heidegger does not get into time itself, which is supposed to be the topic of the unfinished part of the book. In a 1962 lecture titled *On Time and Being*, Heidegger reveals a part of his thinking on time. In this lecture, the leading question remains the same as in *Being and Time*, and he continues his notions of the interpenetration or unity of the three times, in which each of them is presencing and revealing the others. This

leads to the discussions of the dimension or dimensionality of time, ending up with the notion of four-dimensional time.

Time or temporality as explained above consists in the mutual reaching out and opening up of future, past, and present. Having-been offers the future to itself, and the reciprocal relation of both at the same time brings about the present. It is in this sense of opening up that one talks about the dimension or dimensionality of time. "Dimensionality consists in a reaching out that opens up, in which futural approaching brings about what has been, what has been brings about futural approaching, and the reciprocal relation of both brings about the opening up of openness."⁵⁴ This threefold interplay of reaching out already reveals three dimensions of time.

However, there is something more if one examines time carefully, and it is the presencing (*Anwesen*) that has been discussed above. As we know, in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, presencing is nearly identical with the present. But in his *On Time and Being*, he holds that though presencing is given in the present, "[n]ot every presencing is necessarily the present."⁵⁵ For presencing also manifests itself in absence, that is, what has been or what is to come, and this manner of presencing by no means coincides with presencing in the sense of the immediate present. Thus, in a way, presencing is the unity of the three interplaying ways of presencing and is the very dimension that makes these three dimensions and their interplay possible. Heidegger says:

In the approaching of what is not yet present and in the having-been of what is no longer present and even in the present itself, there always plays a kind of approach and bringing about, that is, a kind of presencing. We cannot attribute the presencing to be thus thought to one of the three dimensions of time, to the present which would seem obvious. Rather, the unity of time's three dimensions consists in the interplay of each toward each. This interplay proves to be the true extending, playing in the very heart of time, the fourth dimension, so to speak—not only so to speak, but in the nature of the matter. True time is four-dimensional [*vierdimensional*].⁵⁶

This is a most interesting statement, but, unfortunately, not many Heideggerian scholars have paid attention to it. Instead, many of us may be familiar with the concept of the fourfold world (*Geviert Welt*) found in the later works of Heidegger. This is a rather mystical view of the world, wherein the world consists of four elements, namely gods, heaven, earth, and mortals, and their interplay brings the whole world into a meaningful process of revealing. This worldview is called a playful mirror (*Spiel-Spiegel*), in the sense that each of the four reaches out in its own way while at the same time reflecting others in itself.

It is in the same manner that four dimensions of time interplay and reflect each other in a mirror-like realm. Using the metaphor of the playful mirror, if we say that object, image, and mirror are three dimensions, then the light that makes seeing a mirror image possible is the fourth dimension. It is the light that lights up the process of seeing and brings object, image, and mirror into play. In the interplay of the four, they reflect and reveal one another; thus, one sees an image in the mirror. In this metaphor, the light is not something beyond; rather it is the revealing or presencing

of the thing itself. Thus, Heidegger thinks that what we called the fourth dimension of time should actually be the first, for it is the most original and determines the rest. This presencing makes the other three dimensions possible by the way it “brings about to each its own presencing, holds them apart thus opened and so holds them toward one another in the nearness by which the three dimensions remain near one another.”⁵⁷

In this sense the fourth dimension of time is the nearness (*Nähe*) of presencing out of present, past, and future, the nearness that unifies time’s threefold opening up. Meanwhile, the presencing that brings the three times near has the character of denial and withholding, for it brings future, past, and present near to one another by distancing them or holding them apart. “In true time and its time-space, the giving of what has-been, that is, of what is no longer present, the denial of the present manifested itself. In the giving of future, that is, of what is not yet present, the withholding of the present manifested itself. Denial and withholding exhibit the same trait as self-withholding in sending: namely, self-withdrawal.”⁵⁸ This way it keeps open what has been by denying its advent as present, and keeps open the approach from the future by withholding the present from the approach. This is the manner by which what has been, what is about to be, and the present reach out toward each other.

Derrida is one of the very few who offer a follow-up to Heidegger’s discussions at this point, and he interprets the unity of three times to be the play itself. He says: “The *play* (*Zuspiel*) also marks, works on, manifests the unity of the three dimensions of time, which is to say a fourth dimension: The ‘giving’ of the *es gibt Zeit* belongs to the play of this ‘quadridimensionality,’ to this *properness* of time that would thus be quadridimensional.”⁵⁹ Here Derrida draws upon Heidegger’s notion of “*es gibt Zeit*” and thinks that the *es gibt* plays (*spielt*) in the movement of the disclosing (*Entbergen*), in that which frees from the withdrawal (*retrait*), when what is hidden shows itself or what is sheltered appears. He understands the giving to be the play; meanwhile the play is a play of gift. Thus, the fourth dimension of time is not a figure, or a manner of speaking or of counting; rather it is the giving of the thing itself. “This thing itself of time implies the play of the four and the play of the gift.”⁶⁰

For Derrida, this gift language is not a superficial correlation in language; rather it is deep-rooted in thought itself. He says: “That a gift is called a present, that ‘to give’ may also be said ‘to make a present,’ ‘to give a present’ (in French as well as in English, for example), this will not be for us just a verbal clue, a linguistic chance or *alea*.”⁶¹ The present in the sense of gift is certainly not the present as the now being distinct from the no-longer-now of the past and the not-yet-now of the future. Rather this present speaks of presence, the fourth dimension of time. Derrida brings the ordinary experience of giving a gift to its relationship with time in a sophisticated way:

To give a gift requires that one then forget, and asks the other to forget, absolutely, that a gift has been given, so that the gift, if there is one, would vanish without a trace. If time is a calendar, a ring or annum, a circle or a cycle, then the gift calls upon us to tear up the circle of time, to breach the circular movement of exchange and reciprocity, and in a “moment” of madness, to do something for once without or beyond reason, in a time without time, to give without return.⁶²

To give a gift is not for the purpose of exchange or reciprocity; it means giving without return. Thus, the giver and receiver both need to forget and leave no trace of the gift in their minds. This is contrary to the ordinary conception of gift, which is for the purpose of memorizing. With the vanishing of memory or trace, one goes beyond the conventional reason of exchange, and breaks the circle of time. A moment of “time without time” emerges in such an experience of a giving that leaves behind the cycle of time. Thus the present in the sense of gift is a time without time. Here it is important to notice that the phrase “time without time” comes very close to Longchenpa’s notion of timeless time.

Marion, on the other hand, develops the idea of the present-being-gift in a theological context. He talks about the Eucharistic presence of Christ in consecrated bread and wine:

Not first of a privileged temporalization of time (*the here and now* of the present) but of *the present, that is to say, of the gift*. Eucharistic presence must be understood starting most certainly from the present, but the present must be understood first as a gift that is given. One must measure the dimensions of eucharistic presence against the fullness of this gift. . . . The rigor of the gift must order the dimensions of the temporality where the present is made gift.⁶³

In Heidegger’s own terms, the fourth time in the sense of presence or presencing shows itself to be letting-presence (*Anwesenlassen*). And letting shows its character in bringing into unconcealment. To allow presence means to unconceal, to bring to openness. This Heideggerian term of letting or *Gelassenheit* comes close to Longchenpa’s terminology of *rig-pa cog-gzhag*—the letting-be that is *gzhi*’s ecstatic intensity.⁶⁴ In unconcealing, a giving prevails, the giving that gives presencing in letting-presence. The sense of giving is enhanced by the expressions “*Es gibt Zeit*” or “*Es gibt Sein*.” Heidegger thinks that one cannot say “time is” or “being is”; rather one should say “*Es gibt Zeit*” or “*Es gibt Sein*.” Different from the English expression “there be,” “*es gibt*” has the literal meaning of “it gives,” from which Heidegger develops the gift-language.

Heidegger further distinguishes two modes of giving: sending (*Schicken*) and extending (*Reichen*). In “*Es gibt Sein*,” the giving shows itself to be sending. Sending is the giving of being. The giving of being holds itself back and withdraws. Such a giving is called sending. Extending, on the other hand, is the giving of time: “We call the giving which gives true time an extending which opens and conceals. As extending is itself a giving, the giving of a giving is concealed in true time.”⁶⁵ In this extending there also belongs a keeping back, a denial or withdrawal. For the denial of the present and the withholding of the present play within the giving of what has been and what will be. In a denial extending, the giving in “*Es gibt Zeit*” opens up the four-dimensional realm. In this way, four-dimensional true time has reached us.

As Heidegger understands it, extending is superior to sending, for “[s]ending of Being lies in the extending of time, [the] opening and concealing of manifold presence into the open realm of time-space.”⁶⁶ Thus, one may think that the fourfold

extending of time could be the "It" (*es*) that gives the being in "*Es gibt Sein*." But Heidegger thinks time by no means is the "It" that gives being, "[f]or time itself remains the gift of an 'It gives' whose giving preserves the realm in which presence is extended."⁶⁷ Time as well as being remains to be the gift of an "It," which can be determined only in *Ereignis*.

Ereignis is the key concept in Heidegger's thought after 1936. He devotes himself to this single concept in many of his later works, some of which have been published only recently. In his notion of *Ereignis*, he is playing with the expression "*es gibt*." To a certain extent, he is obsessed by this single phrase in his later thought. He thinks that it is a common feature of Indo-Germanic languages, though in some, such as Greek and Latin, the "It" is lacking as a separate word or phonetic form, but what is meant by the "It" is still represented. He says: "The area of meaning meant by the It extends from [the] irrelevant to the demonic."⁶⁸ In a certain sense, the "*es gibt*" stands for *Ereignis*. Thus, it means more than its common rendering of "occurrence," "happening," or "event"; the translations "the event of Appropriation," "Appropriation," or more recently "enowning" reflect more accurately the sense Heidegger is trying to convey.

Time gives being, and itself is given by *Ereignis*. Both time and being are the gift of *Ereignis*. "Accordingly, the It that gives in 'It gives Being,' 'It gives time,' proves to be Appropriation [*Ereignis*]."⁶⁹ *Ereignis* determines the destiny of being and extends time as the region (*Gegend*). This way it determines time and being into their own, that is, in their belonging together. Heidegger says: "What determines both, time and Being, in their own, that is, in their belonging together, we shall call: *Ereignis*, the event of Appropriation."⁷⁰

In their belonging together, time and being are appropriated in *Ereignis*. Heidegger thinks that one cannot say "*Ereignis* is" or "there is (*es gibt*) *Ereignis*"; rather one should say "*Ereignis* appropriates (*ereignet*)." To appropriate itself, *Ereignis* must withdraw, that is, expropriate (*enteignet*). *Ereignis* withdraws from the boundless unconcealment of what is most fully its own. Withdrawal or expropriation (*Enteignis*) belongs to *Ereignis*. "By this expropriation, Appropriation does not abandon itself—rather, it preserves what is its own."⁷¹ The denial or withholding in *Ereignis* has already shown itself in the manner of sending and extending in which "It" gives being and time.

Heidegger thinks that "[t]he discussion of Appropriation is indeed the site of the farewell from *Being and time*, but Being and time remain, so to speak, as the gift of Appropriation."⁷² This is because *Ereignis* gives being and time while it withdraws; thus, being or time cannot totally identify themselves with *Ereignis*, but remain a gift of *Ereignis*. In its withdrawal, *Ereignis* sustains an absolute otherness, which is an otherness of total presencing, enclosing the otherness of the three times. This is different from the sense of otherness developed in Derrida or Levinas, which is primarily oriented either to the past or to the future. Derrida's *différance* is an absolute alterity in the sense that it is a "past" that has never been present and never will be. It keeps itself to be a trace or enigma. In Levinas, however, the other (*autrui*) is a relationship with the future, for the presence of the future in the present seems all

the same accomplished face-to-face with the other. Levinas says: "I do not define the other by the future but the future by the other, for the very future of death consists in its total alterity."⁷³ Otherness in this sense is like the strangeness of death, which always lies in the future.

To summarize, time according to Heidegger is an interpenetration of having-been, future, and present in which a fourth dimension of presencing manifests itself, and time itself is the gift of *Ereignis*, which remains as otherness in its withdrawal.

Tentative Conclusion

As we have seen, Longchenpa and the Dzogchen tradition in general understand the past to be no-longer, the future not-yet, and the present no-dwelling. In emphasizing the character of "no," Longchenpa shows the Buddhist inclination toward the insight of emptiness. To Longchenpa a Heideggerian understanding of present as to be "encountering with" is still a dwelling, and only in a no-dwelling and freely letting-go mind can the ultimate reality manifest itself. Heidegger distances himself from the vulgar sense of time as a series of nownesses that turns out to be the very basis of substantial thinking. But he does not venture into emptiness, instead bringing out a picture of the interpenetration or interplay of the three times.

Both Longchenpa and Heidegger go beyond the conventional understanding of time by examining carefully the experience of the passage of time. In such an experience, a fourth time or dimension of time manifests itself to be presence or presencing. Such a presencing, for Longchenpa, is the coming-to-presence of the highest reality *gzhi*; for Heidegger, it is the gift of *Ereignis*, which itself withdraws and remains an otherness. By tracing time back to *Ereignis* or *gzhi*, both of them have investigated time in great depth. Being loaded concepts in their respective traditions, both *Ereignis* and *gzhi* bring up a dynamic process which breaks down the static barrier between time and the timeless as it is manifested in similar forms in the Western and Buddhist traditions.

The coincidence between the two thinkers is of great interest and importance. Is this because I interpret the Dzogchen tradition in a Heideggerian way, or because Heidegger's thought is too Buddhistic? Unless one finds actual evidence, it remains improbable that Heidegger had read or known anything about this fourteenth-century Dzogchen master Longchenpa. Meanwhile, I have avoided using Heideggerian terms to interpret Longchenpa as Guenther so intentionally does. Nonetheless, the similarities between their concepts of four-dimensional time are still striking.

If I am allowed to speculate on the reason for this coincidence, I would say that one possibility is that they shared a certain common source in developing their views. For instance, in the Dzogchen tradition, fourfoldness occurs not only in its understanding of time but also in the concept of the four dynamic levels, and Dzogchen thought is considered to have its origin in a contact with Greek gnosticism.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Heidegger in many ways develops his philosophy by tracing back to the Greek tradition, and his concept of the fourfold world is very much indebted to the ancient Greek worldview. Although Guenther warns us not to confuse

the Dzogchen notion of fourfoldness with Heidegger's *das Geviert*,⁷⁵ their obvious similarity in terms of fourfold time may still be attributed to their common source in the Greek tradition—a topic that certainly holds much promise for further research.

Another possibility, however, is that the quaternity might be embedded in the human mind, constituting a universal way of thinking. As is pointed out by C. G. Jung: "The quaternity is an archetype of almost universal occurrence," and "[t]he ideal of completeness is the circle or sphere, but its natural minimal division is a quaternity."⁷⁶ Jung's observation is confirmed by the Tantric tradition, including Dzogchen, where the *maṇḍala*, a circle embracing quaternity, is popularly used in meditative and ritual practice. One can infer from this theory that by delving sufficiently deeply into our own minds, we will reach the common ground of quaternity, at which point it is not only time that will be seen as fourfold, but also the whole of reality.

The comparative approach has long been accused of being an exercise in magic. Now, however, our comparison of four-dimensional time in Dzogchen and Heidegger does seem to have something to do with magic, insofar as it involves the fundamental mystery of the human mind. That fourfold time is inherently a part of the mysterious processes of the human mind is a source of profound wonder—but equally intriguing are the astonishing coincidences in the thought of Longchenpa and Heidegger as they independently developed this idea.

Notes

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- 74 – See Guenther, *Wholeness Lost and Wholeness Regained*, p. 16.
- 75 – Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, p. 77.
- 76 – C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 167.