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## **Exploring the Nature of Time. Reflections on the Article “Four-dimensional Time in Dzogchen and Heidegger” by Zhinhua Yao**

### ABSTRACT

In 2007, in “Philosophy East and West” (Vol. 57, Issue 4), Zhinhua Yao published the article Four-dimensional Time in Dzogchen and Heidegger. The main purpose of Zhinhua Yao’s text was to discuss the similarities and differences between the four-dimensional time theories as found in these two different traditions of thought and inquire into the possible sources of their striking similarities. Zhinhua Yao’s text ends with his careful tentative conclusion: “Both Longchenpa and Heidegger go beyond the conventional understanding of time by examining carefully the experience of passage of time. In such an experience, a fourth time or dimension of time manifests itself to be presence or presencing.” Finally, he states that this coincidence has a source in the fundamental fourfoldness inherent in the human mind, a fourfoldness which also works in the process of its temporalization.

My paper is an attempt to examine some other possibilities of understanding the question of four-dimensional time in Dzogchen and in Heidegger’s thought than that proposed by Zhinhua Yao. However, I will also try to comment on, or even complete, some of Zhinhua Yao’s conclusions.

### KEY WORDS

Longchenpa, Heidegger, Buddhism, Dzogchen, time, four-dimensional time, temporalization, ecstatic temporality, pure immanence, metaphysics, base, enowning

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## TIME AND METAPHYSICS

It is beyond question that exploring the nature of time is one of the most difficult matters for human thinking, however it also seems obvious that the understanding of time must be *a fortiori* bound with some accepted understanding of reality and subjectivity. Therefore, any thinking of time, temporality, and four-dimensional time requires careful reflection on that relation and a precise clarification of the fundamental concept of reality and time, both in Dzogchen and in Heidegger (1889–1976). Only then will it be possible to reach any real meaning of the expression “four-dimensional time”.

I suggest we start with the following introductory, and probably important, remark about Zhinhua Yao’s interpretation: he does not seem to understand, or at least chooses to ignore, one basic fact about Heidegger’s thought. Following Husserl, who in his early phenomenology formulated the idea of the destruction of metaphysics, Heidegger in *Being and Time* already tried to carry it out, starting, however, from a different position. In § 6. of *Being and Time* we read that “taking *the question of Being as our clue* we are to *destroy* the traditional content of the traditional ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being – the ways which have guided us ever since.”<sup>1</sup> *Überwindung der Metaphysik* (*Overcoming of Metaphysics*) is one of Heidegger’s guiding ideas, which will be further radicalised by him along his path of thinking. Zhinhua Yao, however, states: “Among Western philosophers, Heidegger is one of the few who treats time seriously and brings it within the scope of metaphysics” and a little later “Heidegger starts metaphysical questioning of being with human existence.”<sup>2</sup>

Such an understanding of Heidegger’s philosophy seems to have vital consequences for Zhinhua Yao’s line of reasoning, because it makes it difficult for him to identify the key problem indicated by Derrida in his commentary on Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. As Derrida used to say, time as the name for the rule of presence constitutes a part of metaphysics and belongs to its vocabulary. According to him, there is no possibility of another notion of time, because there is no escape from metaphysics at all. However, this is exactly what Heidegger set out to do in *Being and Time*. Therefore Derrida says that a common concept of time is without alternative, because ‘an *other* concept of time cannot be opposed to it, since time in general belongs to metaphysical conceptuality. In attempting to produce this other concept, one rapidly would

<sup>1</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Oxford 1990, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Yao Zhinhua, op. cit., p. 520.

come to see that it is constructed out of other metaphysical or ontotheological predicates. Was this not Heidegger's experience in *Being and Time*?<sup>3</sup>

We find a similar problem in Buddhism, or in Dzogchen to be more precise. After Nāgārjuna's deconstruction of time in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, how is it possible at all that Longchenpa (*Klong-chen rab 'byams pa*, 1308–1363) still ponders the question of time and thinks about the four-dimensional time despite Nagarjuna's negative verdict on time itself, despite his view on the illusionary nature of time?

So we have to deal with a set of very fundamental questions which seems to be absent from Zhinhua Yao considerations. If time is something which is actually included within metaphysics and this very metaphysics determines time as the name for presence, how is it possible that after the deconstruction or smashing of the possibility of any substance we can still use the notion of time? If it is the case, can we use it in another meaning somehow? It seems that we deal here probably with two options: firstly, it is reasonable to talk about time only via its relation to metaphysics, only within the scope of it, and not beyond it as Nāgārjuna and Derrida suggest? Secondly, it will be possible to extend thinking on time beyond the scope of metaphysics, as proposed by Longchenpa and Heidegger. We should, however, ask *a fortiori* about the difference and relation between these two usages of the notion of time, also about the possibility, basis for, and the meaning of, this *second* usage of the notion of time which already lies beyond the realm of metaphysics, which somehow culminates in the term *four-dimensional time*. Briefly put: this second option means that it will be somehow possible to conceive time beyond metaphysics while additionally opening up the possibility that the source of time lies outside realm of metaphysics.

## TIME BEYOND METAPHYSICS

It seems that both Longchenpa and Heidegger try to explore that second option in understanding the nature of time. If so, the first and metaphysical one, the so-called common notion of time, should already be somehow transcended. This automatically means that understanding time as a kind a flow of moments from the past to the future, an understanding based on metaphysical notions of being, presence, relations, cause and effect, etc., should be transcended.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Derrida, Ousia and Gramme: *Note on a Note from Being and Time*, [in:] J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. with additional notes A. Bass, Chicago 1982, p. 63.

Instead of thinking about time in this manner we should rather think about it in terms of temporalization – the manner in which time happens, the manner in which time is produced or given. It should be stressed that temporalization as a “production” of time should be contrasted with time flow which may be understood only as a derivation of temporalization, as common time. This could even be drawn from Husserl’s analysis of time, but is also well-proved by Heidegger’s distinction, and analysis, of the authentic and inauthentic time of *Dasein* (perhaps it is a kind of Heideggerian subjectivity) which we find in *Sein und Zeit*. Inauthentic time, briefly put, is a time of ontic relations, but its basis, as it were, is authentic time, i.e. primal, ecstatic temporalization as a free oscillation of its three dimensions – *ecstasies*, which are accordingly quite different from the three directions of common time.

To merely outline here this complex range of problems: the term “ecstasy” is derived by Heidegger from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning “standing beyond, outside”. Heidegger, in his description of ecstasies also uses alternatively the rather ambiguous German term *Entrückung*, which literally means “pushing away”, “removing”, but also “release”. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger claims that ecstasies have their “where to” (*Wohin*). The “where to” (*Wohin*) of every ecstasy he terms its horizontal scheme. The future, the having been, and the present as ecstasies give *Dasein* the dynamics of “toward itself,” “back to,” and “letting something be encountered”, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Let us look especially at the characteristics of the latter ecstasy.

Such an understanding of ecstatic temporality with the primary role of the future allows Heidegger to claim in *Sein und Zeit* that the “having been” stems “in a way” from the future, namely in the sense that it is the future that, by “releasing the present”, becomes the past.<sup>5</sup> Also temporality itself as ‘the primary “beyond itself” in itself and for itself’ possesses a certain horizon.<sup>6</sup> The structure of the temporality of *Dasein* is thus characterised by ecstaticity and horizontality, while temporality itself temporalizes (*zeitigt*) itself. To sum up, according to Heidegger:

1. The essence of time is of an ecstatic character.
2. The ecstatic structure of time is characterised by horizontality.
3. Time does not pass, nor does it remain, but it temporalizes itself. Temporalizing is a primal phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) of “motion” (*Bewegung*).

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<sup>4</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. J. Stambaugh, Albany 1996, p. 302.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 461.

4. Time is not connected with sensibility but is more primary than sensibility, mind, or intellect. Heidegger stresses that by intellect here he means finite intellect.

5. Time, which constitutes the continuity of *Dasein*, cannot be grasped, if *Dasein* is reduced to such theoretical frameworks as ‘psychical whole, cognitive-volitional subject, self-awareness, or as the unity of body, soul, and mind’.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger states in *Sein und Zeit*: ‘Temporality “is” not a *being* at all. It is not, but rather *temporalizes* itself.’<sup>8</sup> He calls the temporalizing of that temporality the primary, source, time. According to Heidegger it is the ecstatic temporality that is the condition of *Dasein*’s existence, along with its “here” (*Da*). Ecstatic temporality *clears* (*lichtet*) the “here.”<sup>9</sup> It is only that *clearing* (*Gelichtetheit*) that makes every illumination and elucidation (*Erleuchtung und Erhellung*), every perception, “seeing” and the possession of anything, possible.<sup>10</sup>

As we read in *Sein und Zeit*: ““Time” is neither objectively present in the “subject” nor in the “object”, neither “inside” nor “outside”; and it “is” “*prior*” to every subjectivity and objectivity, because it presents the condition of the very possibility of this “*prior*”.”<sup>11</sup>

Heidegger’s reflections on temporality in *Sein und Zeit* reach a point where he isolates the proper temporality of *Dasein*. This turns out to be the forerunning-repeated moment (*der vorlaufend-wiederholende Augenblick*), the proper present (*Gegen-wart*, literally towards-waiting, waiting for what comes from ahead) that ‘lets what it discovers at hand and objectively present be encountered in time.’<sup>12</sup> Heidegger emphasises that the term “moment” has to be understood in the active sense, as ecstasy, and that is why it cannot be made clear in terms of the “now”, being a temporal phenomenon belonging to intra-temporality: ‘the time “in which” objectively present things come into being and pass away’.<sup>13</sup> In that sense, the moment, strictly speaking, is not a time-related term. Nothing can occur within a moment, claims Heidegger. In a moment, there would take place a unification of the three ecstasies of temporality in their proper *modi*, and *Dasein* would “become” an outspread, ecstatic continuity.

<sup>7</sup> See: idem, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy)*, trans. M. Heim, Bloomington 1984, p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 321.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 384–385.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

## FOUR-DIMENSIONAL TIME AS THE ULTIMATE DIMENSION OF TIME

*Time and Being* (1962) is considered to be the ultimate discussion of the question of temporality by Heidegger, although passages concerning temporality can also be found in the earlier *Contributions to Philosophy*. The having been, the present and the future, characterised by Heidegger as con-temporary (*Gleich-zeitige*), interpenetrate, yield to one another (*Sich-einander Reichen*), and with them time-space (*Zeit-Raum*) clears itself (*lichtet-sich*). Temporalizing in the unity of that contemporaneity, time spaces (*einräumt*) time-space. Time itself, primal time, in the fullness of its nature, does not move, rests inert in the Open (*Offene*), the matrix of all relations.<sup>14</sup> Speaking of the unity of those three dimensions, Heidegger calls it the fourth dimension of time.

According to Heidegger, the ecstatic unity of the horizon of temporality would be a temporal condition for the possibility of the world, the possibility of the appearance of phenomena. At the same time, that process would be, according to Heidegger, the nullifying of nothingness (*Nichts nichtet*) (this expression was famously criticised by Carnap). During the seminar in Le Thor (1969), Heidegger would say that nothingness is a characteristic of being (*Sein*), which would be recorded in the following way: 'Being : Nothing : The Same.'<sup>15</sup> The world, then, is not nothingness in the sense of absence, the absence of nothing: the world is nothingness as temporalizing temporality. In that sense, nothingness would be of a founding character with respect to it. That is why Heidegger terms that nothingness *nihil originarium*, and its proper temporalization would be the primary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) of motion (*Bewegung*), motion inseparable from the appearance of phenomena. In connection with this motion, Heidegger talks about vibration, corrugation (*Erzittern*), inexhaustible oscillation (*Schwingung*) of enowning (*Ereignis*), which would radiate within the Open and permeate it (*durchragen*).<sup>16</sup>

In Dzogchen, the ultimate dimension is described as the primordially clear (*ka dag*) basis (*gzhi*), including three aspects: essence (*ngo bo*) or emptiness (*stong nyid*), nature (*rang bzhin*) or clarity (*gsal ba*), and energy or potentiality (*thugs rje*). The name for that primary state in Dzogchen teachings, is

<sup>14</sup> Idem, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Hertz, New York 1971, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Idem, *Four Seminars: Le Thor 1966, 1968, 1969, Zähringen 1973*, trans. A. Mitchell, F. Raffoul, Bloomington & Indianapolis 2003, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. P. Emad, K. Maly, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1999, p. 262.

Samantabhadra or Kuntu Zangpo, the Primeval Buddha. Thus, in *Dharma-dhatu's Treasury* (*Chos dbying rin po che'i mdzod ces bya ba*) of Longchenpa, we can read that everything that emerges, or arises, within the expanse of spontaneity/self-perfection (*lhun grub klong*), which is an empty, clear basis (*gzhi*) of everything, a never-existing basis, though manifest in everything, from it originate samsara and nirvana, never, however, inseparable from it.<sup>17</sup> That primeval, unborn spontaneity is at the same time nothing other than the characteristic of clarity of the mind (*sems nyid*), luminous in its nature (*rang bzhin*); that is why samsara and nirvana are essentially nothing other than the mentioned mind, which has no beginning, middle, or end, in the temporal, as well as in the spatial, sense – it transcends time and space, cause and effect, the extremes of nihilism and eternalism, all concepts, and is like a cloudless sky. It is the natural, true, state of all beings, the Primeval Buddha, and lights, rays, and thigles, would be the most subtle dimension, the inner clarity (*nang gsal*) of its constant, unrestrained manifestation. A failure to recognise that state, an occurrence of ignorance as the source of samsara, launches, as it were, the flow of the conventionally understood time, which, in essence, would anyway only be a manifestation of Kuntu Zangpo time that is non-temporal in its nature.

That is, very briefly, what the understanding of the ultimate dimension in Dzogchen teachings – termed variously as Primeval Buddha, Samantabhadra, Kuntu, and Zangpo<sup>18</sup> – would have to be. This understanding also has an aspect that is closely linked to the problem of time that interests us here. As explained by Longchenpa, “The three times and timeless time is Kuntu Zangpo time, and it is the originally accomplished and changeless state.”<sup>19</sup>

Generally speaking, Longchenpa distinguishes four times (*dus bzhi*): the past, the present, the future and the fourth time (*dus bzhi pa*).<sup>20</sup> His understanding of the first three is conventional in principle, although he stresses the non-existence of time as such, because for him not only do the past and the future not exist, but the present as well, and here he seems to be following the analyses of Nāgārjuna's: “Past – it has ceased; future – it has not yet come into existence; Present – it does not linger. It is neither within nor

<sup>17</sup> See: Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*, trans. R. Barron, Junction City 2001, pp. 3–5.

<sup>18</sup> Namkhai Norbu, *The Crystal and the Way of Light. Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen*, Ithaca 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, *Buddha Mind. An Anthology of Longchen Rabjam's Writings on Dzogpa Czenpo*, Ithaca 1989, p. 347.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

without nor anywhere. Know it to be like the sky and immune to propositions about it.”<sup>21</sup>

Here again we find the familiar metaphor of the sky as a metaphor of the primordial state. That state, according to Longchenpa, transcends all terms that might apply to it. The fourth time is the timeless time (*dus med*), or no-time, in the sense of the atemporal expression, original ground (*gdod ma'i gzhi*). That ground is entirely free from any determinants of the conventionally understood three times. Longchenpa himself states that in the passage quoted by Zhinhua Yao in his article<sup>22</sup>:

This self-existing pristine cognitiveness, (evoked through) 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 Prajnaparamita, Madhyamika,  
Zhi-byed, calming (the rush of) propositions and suffering, Mahamudra,  
rDzogs-chen, the very meaningfulness of meaningfulness.

Quoting this text of Longchenpa on time, Zhinhua Yao states: “Here Longchenpa does not show us in detail how three times are no-time.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Longchenpa is not very outspoken as to how the three times are no-time, but there might be fundamental reasons for that which Zhinhua Yao seems to be unaware – namely that the experience of no-time is one that cancels the common experience of time. It is an extra-conceptual experience, unspoken in language, which Longchenpa identifies with realisation of the nature of the mind, mentioning the various names it has been given in different schools of Buddhism.

Similarly, while quoting Namkhai Norbu's remarks on primary presence, he asks: “Then how is this true state, which is beyond the past, present, and future, related to time? Is it totally different from the time, or only another dimension of time? Namkhai Norbu does not state this clearly.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Longchenpa (Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa), *Kindly Bent to Easy Us: From the Trilogy of Finding Comfort and Ease (Ngal-gso-skor-gsum)*, 3 vols, trans. from the Tibetan and annotated by H. V. Guenther, Emeryville 1975–1976, vol. I, p. 196.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, *Kindly Bent to Easy Us: From the Trilogy of Finding Comfort and Ease (Ngal-gso-skor-gsum)*, 3 vols, trans. from the Tibetan and annotated by H. V. Guenther, Emeryville 1975–1976, vol. 2, pp. 88–89.

<sup>23</sup> Zhinhua Yao, op. cit., p. 517.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 515.



The problem is, such an explanation of the relationship between the Kuntu Zangpo time and the common time probably isn't possible at all, as it is impossible to explain the primordial state. It is perhaps possible to point to it, using for example symbols or metaphors, as with the sky or the mirror metaphors. Since, as explained by Longchenpa:<sup>25</sup>

The nature of all samsara and nirvana is this luminous mind,  
 Unmanifest, unproduced, indeterminate spontaneity,  
 Coming from nowhere and going nowhere;  
 The matrix of luminous mind indicates neither past nor future,  
 For it is unvarying in its all-pervasive uniformity.  
 Reality, just as it is, without beginning, middle or end,  
 An all-pervasive smoothness, is skylike in nature;  
 Without either beginning or end, it supersedes linear time.

This luminous mind as the nature of all samsara and nirvana is self-existing, timeless cognitiveness, which is expressed by the Tibetan term, *ye shes*. As pointed out by Keith Dowman, the particle *ye* is often translated as “timeless”, and then the whole expression could be translated as “timeless awareness”, which yet opens up a possibility of reification through the identification of the timeless with that which is primordial, or original (*ye nas*) in the sense of having existed since forever, or from some beginning.<sup>26</sup> Since *ye* is at the same time an onomatopoeic evocation of the now, *ye shes* can also be understood as “awareness in the now”, the experiencing of which is often rendered through the Tibetan term *rig pa*. It has been variously translated as “pure essence,” “instant presence,” “inner awareness,” “empty cognition,” “gnosis”, which might be the result of an unusual convergence of epistemology, ontology, and temporality, sedimented, as it were, in its rich semantic scope. Despite this semantic richness that convergence seems to be an unavoidable aporia. An aporia usually appears when we are trying to express in language the unutterable, when we arrive at the limit of what can be uttered in it. Atemporal “awareness in the now” is an aporia, as is the previously quoted statement of Longchenpa’s: “The three times and timeless time is Kuntu Zangpo time, and it is the originally accomplished and changeless state.” The atemporal continuity of a primordial state is an aporia, as is stating that the fourth time is no-time. The aporia of

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<sup>25</sup> *Spaciousness: The Radical Dzogchen of the Vajra-Heart. Longchenpa's Treasury of the Dharmadatu*, trans. from the Tibetan and Commentary by K. Dowman, Katmandhu 2013, pp. 11–12.

<sup>26</sup> See: *ibidem*, p. 110.

the uttering of the primordial state cannot be removed, it can only be bypassed through a metaphor, but it Zhinhua Yao seems to be ignoring such a state of affairs. This is probably why he maintains that “Dzogchen brought together time and the timeless, allowing the timeless to penetrate into time.”<sup>27</sup> Is this not saying too much, however? For that “timeless” should be understood in terms of a non-dual pristine awareness which is devoid of conventions of common three times. This pristine awareness is only perceptible by direct experience and hence is not a subject of conceptual thought. Such non-dual awareness, which may be termed ‘fourth time,’ could be regarded as absolute and beyond the conventionality of three times, as pure immanence which is extraneously empty of all the impure phenomena associated with cyclic existence. Even if this view has been the focus of extensive debate in Buddhism over the centuries, it seems that Longchenpa, who was the eminent Dzogchen master and adept of the Nyingmapa School, could not have disagreed with it.<sup>28</sup>

Discussing Heidegger’s views on time, Zhinhua Yao fails to mention the ecstatic character of temporality, thus essentially imputing to Heidegger the use of the common notion of time. It seems, however, that the confinement to the common, metaphysical, understanding of time shuts him off, not only from the proper understanding of what Heidegger tries to say about time, but makes it impossible for him to interpret the Dzogchen definition of time. If the four-dimensional time appears to be non-temporal in the common understanding of time, one may still say it would be the potentiality, the vibration of the Open as the ultimate dimension. If there are analogies between Heidegger’s views on time and the understanding of time in Longchenpa (or, broadly speaking, Dzogchen), they would stem rather from a similar, non-metaphysical, energetic, understanding of the ultimate dimension as the pure immanence, than from the fourfold, mandalic, structure of the mind, as Zhinhua Yao suggests. It seems that in using the fourth time concept that is close in formulation to Heidegger’s, Longchenpa departs from the metaphysical understanding of time, yet Zhinhua Yao, adhering mostly to the common understanding of time, cannot arrive at that interpretation.

The above remarks do not, of course, mean that the task is an easy one. On the contrary – the problem of time, or temporality, counts among the most complicated, also, if not only, for the fact that any formulation of time would essentially be an attempt to utter the unutterable. If the four-dimensional time

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 518.

<sup>28</sup> See: Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. Its Fundamentals and History*, trans. and edited by G. Dorje and M. Kapstein, Boston 1991.

as no-time is not a being of any kind, how then are we supposed to understand it or talk about it? What would it be? Pure immanence beyond language? No doubt, we have strayed rather far here from the common understanding of time, with its evanescence, its passing of moment after moment. Even more: *that* time seems to vanish, as it were, when we try to think its source.

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