VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Time-Being: East and West

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I SHOULD LIKE to attempt a comparison of the views on time and existence or being found in Martin Heidegger and in Zen Buddhism, focusing on Heidegger whom I know better. Ever since the 19th Century, western philosophy and literature has come more and more to consider whatever we mean by existence as a *process*, as something permeated by dynamic, nonstatic movement. Examples of the figures who illustrate process philosophy, and if I may coin a term, process literature, would be, aside from Heidegger: Whitehead, Bergson, Sartre, Proust, Joyce. What I would like to discuss here is the fundamental question of *why* this emphasis on time and process comes about and why time comes to be linked so intimately with existence, more specifically in western thought, *human* existence. In order to sort out these difficult questions of time, being, existence and human existence, let us begin with the most difficult one: *time*.

Time is a word which everyone is familiar with and perhaps no one really understands, not even—or perhaps especially not—the philosophers who have wrestled with it for 2000 years. First of all, when we speak of time, if we do at all, we usually mean what Heidegger calls "clock time," keeping track of time in order, for instance, to get to an appointment "on time." Here we can see that the word time creeps into our language without our even being aware of it, for what do we really mean when we say to be "on time." To be punctual, to arrive somewhere at a certain numbered "point in time." But with the phrase "in time" we are already getting at the heart of the question of time. Leaving aside the valid, but derivative, question of calculating time with a clock or watch, we are aware, if only vaguely, that everything is somehow *in time*. Stones are in time; plants and animals are in time. And man is in time. Everything is in time, but not in exactly the same way. Stones are in time in a minimal way. Plants, on the other hand, participate more fully in time in that they grow,

bloom and fade away. The animal participates still more fully in time in that it sleeps, it wakes, and has a certain dynamic life pattern. What about man? Man is the most time-related being of all, especially in the western tradition beginning with Aristotle who states that time is measured by the "numbering soul"; i.e., man.

These are very general preliminary remarks. Let us turn now to the topic thinker of this discussion—Martin Heidegger. In doing so, we shall implicitly relate him to Buddhism as we go along and finally point out the differences between Heidegger and Buddhism.

Heidegger is perhaps the first western thinker to place finitude at the very core of man's being. Of course, man's finitude has always been acknowledged in western thinking; but that finitude was couched within the framework of some ontological security, either the ultimate immortality of the soul (Plato) or some promise of everlasting life (Christianity). One could call the finitude which Heidegger speaks of a *radical* finitude; i.e., a *root* finitude, unmitigated or alleviated by a guarantee of ontological security. And when Heidegger speaks of finitude, he means *human* finitude, just as when he speaks of existence, he means *human* existence. In Heidegger's terminology, the beings which we mentioned before—stones, plants and animals—*are* (in time), but they do not *exist*. To exist means literally to stand outside of oneself; and that means, in simple English, to be conscious—of the world, of one's self and, ultimately, of the supreme significance of one's own death. Man is the only being who *knows* that he will die. Whatever obvious negative implications follow from this, Heidegger does *not* simply mean: man knows that he has a limited life span, that his death is certain, and that the time of his death is absolutely uncertain. Heidegger's emphasis on finitude and death is that it makes it possible for the human being to realize his own true possibilities. By way of interpretation, I would say that the time structures constituting man's anticipation and espousement of death make his very unique *consciousness* possible. To explain this, I must attempt to elucidate Heidegger's understanding of time, and I shall forcibly limit myself to that. Otherwise, we shall get lost in the specific scope of this discussion.

For Heidegger, clock time, with which we are all familiar and without which we could not function in everyday life, is derivative of the time structures of human consciousness. Two things must be mentioned at this point. One, I am deliberately putting Heidegger into a more conventional language, rather foreign to him, at the risk of flattening him down, but with the hope of making

him comprehensible. And, two, we must bear in mind that with the term human consciousness, nothing subjective nor even *familiar* to us is meant. It is perhaps one of the most fundamental and significant insights of *all* of Heidegger's thinking, early and late, that we *do not know what or who man is.* This simply cannot be emphasized strongly enough.

To return to the time structures of "human" consciousness. Consciousness is, after all, an uncanny thing. The only reason that we seldom realize this is that we take it for granted. We are so oriented toward the world of everyday business that we hardly reflect on how it is that we are *aware* of anything. This Heidegger attempts to explain. How is it that man has a certain open dimension which makes him able to anticipate next week, to remember his childhood, suddenly to be aware that he *is there* in the present. A dog cannot make a luncheon date for next Thursday. Nor can he wonder why he is doing something. The animal has a relationship to its world which is strange and unintelligible to us. This becomes evident when we observe his *expression.* The animal *is,* in some way, its world; it is not *in* its world in the way that man is since it has no possibility of distancing itself from that world.

What about man? According to Heidegger, man is future-oriented; he anticipates and thinks about what is to come, about his real possibilities for the sake of which he exists. His consciousness stretches forward into the future, and that Future comes to meet him, so to speak. In doing so, he is brought back to his past, the ground upon which he stands, and when future returns to past, the present is engendered. Thus, a certain dimensionality and openness is constituted which makes his consciousness possible. If he could not anticipate his true possibilities and the most extreme possibility of his life, his death, his consciousness would, so to speak, stretch forward into a limitless nothingness, never to return to the past and, thus, never to experience the full present. It is the extreme limit and possibility of death which makes a closed structure with the openness of awareness possible. All of this is too brief and inadequate to be really clear, and we can perhaps return to it in discussion.

What I would like to point out here by way of anticipation of a *difference* between Heidegger and Buddhism is precisely the quality of making *possible.* Time, these time structures, makes consciousness possible. Here, Heidegger is still basically within the Kantian framework: the condition of the possibility of consciousness or knowledge; more simply, the question: How can I know something? As far as I can see, this is quite foreign to Buddhism. Buddhism does not share this primary concern of western philosophy which asks the

question: How is it that I can *know* something? One might say that the kind of "knowledge" which Buddhism is interested in has to do, not with finding out facts and conditions of knowing those facts, but with a *realization* of something which is already there. Only something already there can be *realized*. I suppose the joke of Emerson belongs here, who, when he bumped into a tree (almost as bad as the proverbial Thales falling down the well because he was too busy looking at the heavens), said: "I saw the tree, but I didn't realize it."

To return to our remarks on Heidegger, we still have to say something about existence and its relation to time and then turn to Buddhism. As we said before, existence for Heidegger is uniquely *human* existence. To ek-sist is literally to stand out, to be outside of one's self. The word "ecstatic" has the same basic meaning as the word for existence; to be outside of oneself, provided that we keep the popular, rather silly, connotation of that word, ecstatic, at a distance. To put it in somewhat oversimplified, non-Heideggerian language, *consciousness* is a being outside of oneself, outside in the "world"—not the measurable, objective world of science or physics, but closer to the usage of world which we mean when we say that someone lives in his own "world." To ek-sist is to be aware of self and world, of self-in-the-world. Only the human being has this kind of awareness. One of Heidegger's examples for this is that a desk can never *touch* a wall. The desk might be physically smack up against the wall, but it can never touch that wall in the way a person can touch it.

To conclude on Heidegger, only the human being has awareness, exists as time, spinning, so to speak, the stuff and form of consciousness in and as time, timing.

Now, what about existence and time in Buddhism? Since to speak about Buddhism in general makes about as much sense as to speak about western philosophy in general—far too vast a subject—I shall limit myself to speaking and, above all, *asking* about Dōgen. Dōgen lived in the 13th century, at a time when scholasticism was in its prime in the west. Dōgen speaks of existence-time, and one might well be tempted to compare him with the title of Heidegger's classic, major work: *Being and Time*. Undoubtedly, there is a relation. But far from inquiring into the relation of existence or being (I am using these terms synonymously here) to the question of how we know, Dōgen focuses totally on the relation of existence-time to practice-enlightenment. And to fuss a bit, there is no "and" for Dōgen between existence and time; there is a hyphen. I might add that, at least for me, Dōgen is so difficult that Heidegger sometimes looks like mere ontological child's play in comparison. But this, undoubtedly, has to do with my greater familiarity with Heidegger.

Dōgen shares with Heidegger the emphasis on the radical finitude of man, a finitude unshielded by a creator God or a realm of guaranteed personal immortality. Together with this emphasis on finitude and, of course, ultimately bound up with it, Dōgen stresses, as does Heidegger, the impermanence of existence. Existence is shot through with impermanence, change, with the untenability of everything. Here, Dōgen is even more radical than Heidegger, especially the later Heidegger. These two things the thinkers share. Then, however, there are at least two basic differences between them. Although Buddhism regards man as a privileged being—it is very difficult and rare to be born a human being and it is precisely the human being who alone has the opportunity to gain enlightenment—still Buddhism does not have the western conception of man as the rational animal, the animal with a kind of second floor reason superimposed on his animality. Thus, for Buddhism, existence is not sheerly *human* existence and time is not limited to a constitutive function of human consciousness. All sentient beings are finitely existent and *everything* is time, although even Buddhism would probably be able to say that man has a distinctive relation to time without having an exclusive claim upon it.

The second distinction between Heidegger and Dōgen is more technical, and has to do with their understanding of time as such. However innovative Heidegger's analysis of time may be—and I believe that it is innovative—he shares with the whole western Christian and secularized Christian tradition (for example, Karl Marx) the emphasis on the *future* as the meaning of history. Man, and humanity in general, is profoundly directed toward the future. Reality does not lie in the past as it did for Plato, for whom what is real has nothing to do with time and is to be known by recollection, remembering a vision of absolute justice or absolute good. Rather, for the post-Greek western tradition, reality lies in the future. Something is to be attained in the future through the process of history, whether it be the overcoming of sin and evil through redemption and the last judgment, or whether it be the attainment of a classless society through the abolishment of class distinction. Whereas Heidegger would accept neither of these two goals of history or, for that matter, any of the other traditional western goals, there is still a very definite eschatology in his philosophy of Being, particularly in the later works. Heidegger envisions a possible *rapprochement* or belonging together of man and Being if we do not get completely stuck in the essence of modern technology.

And Dōgen? The crucial mode of time for Dōgen is the *present*. Not just any present "now" of ordinary clock time, but what he calls the "absolute present."

This needs to be clarified. Insofar as we understand it at all, most of us—particularly anyone familiar with medieval philosophy—will be inclined to picture an absolute present as something lifted out of time, as a *nunc stans* or a standing now which is timeless. Here the word "absolute" has to mean ab-solved or detached from time, outside of time, "eternal" in the sense of what is everlasting.

A few quotes from Dōgen will show that he cannot mean this at all. The word "absolute," and thus the phrase absolute present, and the meaning of the word "present" in general, must be something quite different. In the light of what I understand of Dōgen's emphasis on practice (sitting) and the inseparability of practice and absolute present, it would seem to me that the absolute present would be a dimension of transient time itself, *not* a moment lifted out of it, and that this absolute present would be primarily realized in human action. This would fit in with Dōgen's de-emphasis on enlightenment as a single, momentary final experience and his emphasis on practice and sustained exertion right at this moment.

"Man will find the proof of eternity by throwing himself into this present and that present and by living up his whole existence in this present."

"When time is not thought of as coming and going, this moment is absolute time for me . . . it appears to be passing, but it is now . . . Do not regard time as merely flying away, do not think that flying away is its sole function. For time to fly away there would have to be a separation (between it and things). Because you imagine that time only passes, you do not learn the truth of being-time. In a word, every being in the entire world is a separate time in one continuum. And since being is time, I am my being-time. Time has the quality of passing, so to speak, from today to tomorrow, from today to yesterday, from yesterday to today, from today to today, from tomorrow to tomorrow. Because this passing is a characteristic of time, present time and past time do not overlap or impinge upon one another . . . since you and I are time, practice-enlightenment is time."[1]

The apparent contradictions for our conceptual minds in these passages are enormous. But, beginning with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and even in a different way, Hegel, philosophy is beginning no longer to find contradiction so objectionable. For Kierkegaard, for instance, the truth of Christianity is an absolute paradox incomprehensible to reason; namely, that God became man, that eternity entered time. Thus, we must not lose patience or throw up our

1 Cited in *The Three Pillars of Zen*, ed. by Philip Kapleau, Boston, 1968.

precious arms in indignant despair if Dōgen does not conform to the expectations of our comfortably rational minds.

What is Dōgen saying? He is saying that the flying away and passing by of time is not so central as we are prone to take it. This very preoccupation with the flying away of time is precisely what prevents us from understanding the truth, the *meaning* of being-time. If I *am* time, time cannot just fly away from me. It is the abstracting and separation of myself from time which blinds me to my identity with it. What could I be if I am not in time? Where could anything exist if it were not (in) time?

The other point that Dōgen seems to be really making in these passages quoted supports the former point, although on the surface it seems to contradict it. Having said that we are too preoccupied with the flying away of time, Dōgen turns around and states that time has the quality of passing, so to speak, from today to tomorrow, from today to yesterday, from yesterday to today, from today to today, from tomorrow to tomorrow. Yes, time moves; but it moves in no way intelligible to our conceptual understanding of it. From today to today? What kind of flying away is this? What is important about the movement of time here is not its flying away, its robbing us of our possessions, desires and experiences; but, rather, its quality of non-obstruction and non-hindrance. It allows things to be without getting in the way of each other.

Whereas the western standing now is lifted out of time and is, therefore, timeless, excluding past and future, Dōgen's absolute present includes all time—past, present and future—in the sense that there is *nothing outside of it*. If something is not now, when is it? Dōgen's absolute present is not only presence, but complete fullness. In contrast to the timeless standing now which negates time and is unable to relate to time, Dōgen's absolute present is, so to speak, the sheer occurrence of time itself. This is what I take to be the meaning of Dōgen's rejection of abrupt, final enlightenment. There is no absolute present of *satori* which settles everything once and for all because such a once and for all, such a finality, is not possible in finite existence. If enlightenment is in the middle of birth and death, we cannot just take ourselves straight out of existence and bask complacently in that enlightenment. After the moment of enlightenment comes another moment, and again and again other moments. The sustained exertion in practice of which Dōgen speaks would mean the realization of the incessant, non-obstructing occurrence of time and the impossibility of some final moment which we can cling to as a much-cherished, idolized moment. It seems to me that Dōgen is not really so much saying that enlightenment is gradual;

but that, ultimately, there is nothing to be *attained*, but everything to be *realized*, in actual practice.

A western thinker perhaps closer to Buddhism than even Heidegger would be Meister Eckhart. Eckhart states that: "The *nunc* (now, eternity) is a taste of time, is a tip of time, and an end of time." This is a truly non-conceptual description of time and eternity. You cannot *taste* clock time. Clock time can only be calculated and reckoned with, but not tasted.

What Eckhart is saying, what Heidegger is saying, and in the most radical way, what Dōgen is saying about time, is that we should not conceptualize it as something separate from ourselves or anything else and that we should not chop it up into the disparate images of past, present and future. In doing so —and we all do it—we cut ourselves off from what we are and fall prey to a dread of something that does not exist in this manner. What have not our poets, Shakespeare, Goethe, etc., written about the ravages of time. This is, again, a preoccupation with the flying away of time as if it were something separate from us, a preoccupation which shuts us off from any possible experience of Dōgen's absolute present. If we fear to lose existence to the flying away and ravages of time, and if we cling to an idea of existence apart from time, how can we ever realize the identity of our existence with time? We should perhaps learn to experience the absence of the "and" in *Being and Time* and perhaps even of the hyphen between existence-time.