

**THE CONCEPT OF «BEING» (*DAS SEIN*)
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN HEIDEGGER
AND THE CONCEPT OF «THE GROUND» (*GZHI*)
IN THE rDZOGS-CHEN TEACHINGS**

Eliás Capriles

In the book *Matrix of Mystery—Scientific and Humanistic Aspects of rDzogs-Chen Thought* (Shambhala Publications, 1984), Tibetologist Herbert V. Guenther equated the sense of the term «Being» (*Das Sein*) in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger with that of the term «The Ground» (*gzhi*) in the rDzogs-chen Teachings, and translated several other terms of the rDzogs-chen Teachings by words used by the German philosopher.

In my opinion, by so doing the great Tibetologist created a great deal of confusion, for the term *gzhi* in the rDzogs-chen Teachings does not at all correspond to the term *Das Sein* in Heidegger's philosophy, and the same is true of most other rDzogs-chen terms translated by Dr. Guenther by German words employed by Heidegger. However, to analyze the meaning of each Tibetan term and compare it with the meaning that Heidegger gave to each German term used by Dr. Guenther as a translation would be beyond the scope of the present article. Here, I shall confine myself to comparing the meanings of the Tibetan term *gzhi* in the rDzogs-chen Teachings and that of the term *Das Sein* in Heidegger's philosophy.

Gzhi

In the rDzogs-chen Teachings, the Tibetan term *gzhi* indicates the basis of both samsara and nirvana, of both being and nonbeing, and of all appearances. It has been compared to a mirror which can reflect all appearances but is not conditioned by those appearances: it is not defiled by the manifestation of samsara —i.e., by unawareness that appearances (are) the mirror and believing that they are inherently and independently existing entities— and is not improved by the manifestation of nirvana —i.e., by the unveiling of all appearances as the mirror and the interruption of overvaluation¹—.

This *gzhi* or base is the principle that gives rise to all ideas-appearances and which all ideas-appearances (are), and yet no idea or appearance can describe it or express it correctly: ideas are defined by contrast with their contraries, but *gzhi* has no contrary to which it may be contrasted. Though all thoughts (are) the base or *gzhi*, the base of *gzhi* is unthinkable (Skt.: *achintya*); whenever we conceive it in terms of overvalued thoughts or ideas we distort it and give rise to misunderstanding.

***Das Sein* and the overvalued comprehension of ideas**

¹Overvaluation is a function of the vibratory activity of the heart focal point of experience which endows ideas with an appearance of absolute truth and exaggerated importance and (positive or negative) value. It gives entities the false appearance of inherent existence, importance and value. Therefore, it is the root of samsara. Its most extreme manifestations —which are the most intense emotions— are experienced as highly unpleasant tensions, vibrations and reverberations in the heart focal point and/or perhaps in other focal points of experience.

Heidegger's concept of *Das Sein* has little to do with the concept of *gzhi* in the rDzogs-chen teachings. From the standpoint of the rDzogs-chen teachings, *Das Sein* is the phenomenon corresponding to overvalued understanding of the most general and imprecise of ideas. In *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, Heidegger wrote²:

«In any circumstance, each and every particular entity, in spite of being unique, may be compared to another (entity)... Being (*Das Sein*), on the other hand, cannot be compared to anything. Only nothingness is other to it³... If, therefore, being expresses what is most particular and determinate, the word «being» cannot continue to be empty. In fact, it never has been. We may be easily persuaded of this fact by a simple comparison. When we hear the word «being» as voice or see the written image, we experience something very different from the sequence of sounds or letters typical of the vocable «abracadabra». Also in the latter there is, as is natural, a sequence of sounds; yet immediately we say that it lacks sense, though we may believe it to be a magic formula. «Being», on the other hand, does not lack sense in the same way. Similarly, «being» —written and seen— is different from «kzomil». This written form also contains a sequence of letters, yet it does not allow us to think of anything. There is no empty word: even when (words are) worn out by usage, (they) still have a content. The noun «being» keeps its force of naming. That precept «let us distance ourselves from that empty word 'being' and move toward particular entities» not only constitutes a hasty indication, but is also an extremely doubtful one...

«...Let us imagine that the indeterminate meaning of being does not exist, and that we do not understand that which that meaning indicates. What would happen then? Would there simply be one noun and one verb less in our language? No. *In that case there would not be in general any language.* Nothing of what manifests in the word entity *as such* would exist; no one to whom one could speak and nothing to speak about. In fact, to say entity as such implies understanding beforehand the entity as entity, that is, (understanding) its being. If we did not understand being, if the word «being» did not have that floating meaning, there would not be any singular word...»

Heidegger is saying that the word «being» brings to our minds a phenomenon which corresponds to the overvalued comprehension of a particular concept—the concept of being—and that therefore we take this phenomenon (which in truth is produced by our mental functions⁴) for a given, self-existent, inherent reality existing independently of our perception. In other words, he is speaking of the overvaluation⁵ of an idea. Moreover, he is saying that this phenomenon and this comprehension are the basis of our experience of entities as inherent realities existing independently of our perception. In other words, he is saying that «being» is the phenomenon at the root of all the perceptions that Buddhism in general and rDzogs-chen in particular consider delusive. To sum up, Heidegger is saying

²Spanish version by Emilio Estiú published in 1980 by Editorial Nova in Buenos Aires: 1st paragraph, p. 117; 2nd paragraph, p. 120.

³Pascal noted that being may be understood only by contrast with nonbeing. Actually, in this case Heidegger's use of *Nichts*—just like Pascal's usage of *le néant*—would be better rendered as *nonbeing* than as *nothingness*.

⁴This is not a position of extreme idealism or of solipsism. It does not claim that the physical-sensory basis of perception is created by the mind, but that individual phenomena are produced by the projection of overvalued ideas on segments of that basis that are singled out by mental events, and that the illusion that they exist inherently, absolutely and independently of our mental functions is produced by those very functions. This may be easily demonstrated, for to Einstein the given was a single energy field with no divisions, and yet we experience it as a cumulus of self-existing entities. In the same way, «Recognition Physics» claims that in itself the universe is not dimensional and that dimensionality is the result of «mental functions» that are part of the given. It is interesting that the theories of David Bohm, the best known of «Recognition Physicists», are accepted by Soviet scientists who want to adapt to Leninist orthodoxy, for they are deemed «realist» in relation to the «idealist» theories of Heisenberg and Bohr.

⁵See note 1.

that being is that which Buddhists and rDzogs-chen-pas would consider the most basic delusion and the basis of all delusions.

In fact, the word «being» brings to our mind the concept of being, which is a most particular and yet general comprehension resulting from the overvaluation of the most general of concepts. kLong-chen Rab-'byams-pa noted that samsara is an «overvaluation»: samsara is the result of the overvaluation of concepts and ideas, ranging from the coarsest ideas —such as those of entities and their qualities, values, etc.— to the subtlest concepts⁶ and the most basic ideational structures of our experience⁷.

Now, what does «overvaluation» mean? Overvaluation means that our mental functions —and in particular the vibrational activity which is particularly associated to the heart focal point of experience (khor-lo; Skt., chakra)— give ideas and concepts an appearance of inherent truth, self-existence, importance and value—whether these ideas immediately interpret sensations, as in sensory perception, or do not refer to immediate sensory activity, as in the perception of the process of thinking or reflecting—.

Let us take the example of overvalued sensory perception. If in our visual field the shape of a woman appears, the idea of «woman» comes to our mind and we experience the shape as being inherently a woman, independently of our mental functions, with a given value and importance. Immediately, another idea comes to our mind, and we experience the woman as being inherently beautiful or ugly, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, etc. And so on and on.

Something similar happens with overvalued thought or reflection. Each of the ideas that come to our minds we take to refer to an inherently existing entity and to be inherently true or false with reference to that entity and, as «we think them», we experience more or less intense tensions and vibrations in our chest, which indicate that they are being overvalued: that we are taking them to be exaggeratedly important and absolutely true (or untrue, which is the opposite side of the same coin).

Being and nonbeing, being and nothingness

We have seen that the concept of being is defined only by contrast with the concept of nonbeing, for only nonbeing is other and opposite to being. However, the basic phenomenon at the root of both concepts is one and the same, for nonbeing and nothingness are but particular ways in which the phenomenon of being is disclosed.

Sartre has masterfully explained nothingness as a particular disclosure of being with his concept of the «presence of an absence». Suppose that my wallet was stolen but I have not realized this fact: although the wallet is absent from my pocket, this absence is not present to me. Now suppose that I have to pay for the newspaper and automatically put my hand in my pocket in order to take out the wallet: I immediately realize that the wallet is not there; the absence of the wallet becomes present to me.

The absence that becomes present to me is that of the-wallet-being-in-my-pocket: it is the wallet's being-in-my-pocket which is revealed through its absence. Thus, it is the wallet's being-in-a-given-place that is disclosed by its absence: the phenomenon disclosed

⁶Such as the concept of being, the concept that there is something self-existent outside ourselves, the concept that our mind is a self-existing entity which experiences, acts, thinks, moves the body, etc.

⁷Among which the subject-object duality—related to the last two concepts mentioned in note 7—is of the greatest importance.

is exactly the same as is disclosed by unexpectedly finding the wallet in my pocket, but it has a negative sign: what I find is not its being-there, but its not-being-there. The same phenomenon is revealed by its presence as by the presence of its absence.

Something similar obtains when we practice the fifteenth *semzìn* (first *semzìn* of the third group) of the Upadesha series of rDzogs-chen or, which is the same thing, when we practice the kind of *vipashyana* (Tibetan: *lhag-thong*) taught by the Khenpo Bodhisattva (Acharya Shantarakshita) and by his disciples, which was expounded in the various *Bhavanakrama* and defended by Kamalasila against Hva-Shan Mahayana in the debate of Samye, and which was adopted as the official *vipashyana* practice by Je Tsong Kha-pa in his *Lam-rim Chen-mo*⁸.

In this practice, we take an entity which normally appears to us as existing inherently and independently of our perception and of all other entities, and question whether it exists in the way in which it appears to exist. At some point, the entity's nonexistence-in-the-way-in-which-it-appears-to-exist becomes evident to us. The dGe-lug-pa consider that the moment when this nonexistence has become evident to us, yet we have not expressed discursively the nonexistence in question, we have realized the entity's *shunyata*⁹, which they identify as an «absolute truth»¹⁰. In the *Semzìn* of the rDzogs-chen teachings, the phenomenon that appears in that moment is considered to be a *nyam* or «illusory perception» resulting from the practice, which may be helpful on the Path but which has no inherent value and pertains to the relative level.

In this case also, what has presented itself to us is an absence that reveals another presence: that which presents itself to us is the absence of the mode of existence that we had wrongly imputed to an entity—the absence of the phenomenon that Heidegger called *Das Sein*—and what it reveals is the phenomenon of apparent inherent existence¹¹ or «phenomenon of being» which we are realizing to be unfounded.

Something similar happens both in psychotic phenomena such as depersonalization and in the practice of rDzogs-chen: the absence of our being inherently that which we had since early childhood believed that we were inherently, becomes present to us. If we are

⁸Some rNying-ma-pa teachers have objected that this practice, which was taught in the *Samdhinirmochana Sutra* of the third *dharmachakra* as well as in the *Shravakabhumi* (lower hinayana level) of Maitreya-Asanga's *Yogacharabhumi*, belonging to a low level of teaching of the third *dharmachakra*—which to the dGe-lug-pa is only provisional—should not be supposed to yield the realization of the definitive *shunyata* of the Madhyamika-Prasangika (a school based on the teachings of the second *dharmachakra*, which it considers the definitive teachings of the Buddha). Nevertheless, the rNying-ma-pa apply the practice in question, which they consider valid for producing a relative result that may be helpful to the treader of the Path.

⁹Emptiness or voidness.

¹⁰Some rNying-ma-pa teachers have objected that this is not absolute truth, but a *nyam* or «illusory perception» issuing from the practice. It is indeed a relative truth, for it is the understanding of the given in terms of an overvalued idea as the opposite of another idea. In the West, Descartes distinguished two ways of understanding the given in terms of ideas: inference, which he called deduction and which we could extend to include all discursive thinking, and intuition, which was the direct, non-discursive grasping of ideas. What rNying-ma-pa teachers have objected is that the nonexistence found in the practice in question is the intuition of an idea which we overvalue and take to be the ultimate truth of that to which it is applied. Therefore, they have claimed that it is an overvalued idea and a delusion. And it may be so, for it is but a negative way of grasping the most general and basic of all phenomena: the overvaluation of the most general of concepts-words, which is the concept of «being».

¹¹I am not using the term in the strict Platonic-Heideggerian sense of the word, which is that of the being of human entities (i.e., the *Dasein*).

unprepared, we panic and try to escape, creating a hell in which we are kept by our very attempt to flee it. If we are prepared, we apply the instructions of Khregs-chod and go through the presence of the absence of our false beliefs to the direct realization of the Unborn Nature, called «Direct Introduction to the state of *rigpa*». In all these cases, nothingness or nonbeing reveals particular ways of being. Indeed, nothingness and nonbeing always reveal being, for they are the other side of the same coin: the coin of being and nonbeing, of being and nothingness. Enlightenment consists in overcoming the sensation that being, nothingness and nonbeing are inherently existing, given realities existing independently from our perception and from other phenomena, and having the character of absolute truths. Therefore, Enlightenment consists in overcoming being and its negative expressions, which are nonbeing and nothingness.

I must make it clear that I do not intend to debase that great Tibetologist and Buddhologist, Dr. Herbert V. Guenther. I owe Dr. Guenther much of what I know about Tibetan Buddhism, spirituality and culture. Yet I felt compelled to clarify a confusion that, in my opinion, may mislead the readers of *Matrix of Mystery*—an excellent book which should make clear to Westerners the functional pattern of the Path-Mandala in the rDzogs-chen Upadesha.