Beyond Synchronicity and Asynchronicity: Dōgen's Being-Time and Future Imaginaries in the Anthropocene

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Introduction

In the vast expanse of Indian cosmology and its adoption into Buddhist thought, the concept of *kalpa* serves as a profound symbol of cyclical deep time, encompassing the creation and recreation of the universe through four recurring stages: the formation or becoming, continuity or the abiding, the decaying, and the "nonmanifest" or empty. As Taigen Dan Leighton explains,

> A kalpa is an incalculably long period of time, with one colorful traditional description of its duration as 'the image of a bird that flies once every hundred years over the peak of Mount Everest with a piece of silk in her talons; the length of time it would take the silk to wear down the mountain completely is said to be one kalpa'. (2007, pp. 110-111)

This mythic measure of Buddhist deep time through the minimal impact of a non-human being on a mountain massif appears grotesquely disparate when compared to our contemporary understanding of deep time through the lens of the Anthropocene, characterised by a deceivingly linear and disastrously disjointed perspective, evincing an impact of almost unintelligible magnitude.

The Anthropocene resignifies the concept of immense time scales in relation to humanity's indelible mark on geological processes. This includes the acceleration of geological changes due to deforestation, urbanisation, and mining; long-lasting alterations of atmospheric and oceanic systems; mass extinctions and biodiversity loss from habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change; persistent stratigraphic markers such as plastic pollution, radioactive isotopes from nuclear testing, and greenhouse gases; and deep disruptions in the carbon, nitrogen, and hydrological cycles. These changes underscore a profound asynchronicity between human and natural timescales, highlighting a stark departure from interconnected ecological rhythms.

Amidst this discordant contemporary temporal landscape, Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, offers a provocative alternative in his concept of *uji* ("being-time"). For Dōgen, time is not merely a backdrop against which events occur; rather, time and being are fundamentally intertwined. Each moment of time is both a specific instance and a manifestation of the entire temporal universe. The concept of kalpas embodies a transcendent view of time, representing a vast, cyclical, and cosmological dimension that transcends human limitations and conceptualisations. *Uji* complements this by emphasising how time is immanently expressed in each moment, demonstrating that the infinite scope of kalpa is embedded within the immediacy of *uji*.

While the Anthropocene portends predetermined futures shaped by human dominion over nature (Nordblad, 2021), the paradoxical transcendence and immanence of Dōgen's *uji* reveals an inherent synchronicity between the present moment and an open, relational future. Indeed, the timeless/infinite and the immediate aspects of being coalesce in every present moment. This contrast underscores the potential for reimagining our temporal futures in a way that acknowledges the Earth's cyclical and interconnected rhythms, aligning more closely with Zen's view of time as a dynamic, open, and unfolding process.

This paper explores the necessity of reframing our understanding of deep time and future imaginaries through Dōgen's concept of "being-time." It argues that the Zen perspective of being-time provides a vital corrective to the predetermined, anthropocentric futures of the Anthropocene. By emphasising impermanence, interconnectedness, and nonduality, *uji* invites a holistic temporal framework that acknowledges the dynamic interplay between present actions and future outcomes. By integrating Dōgen's insights, we can foster a more interconnected approach to envisioning our place within planetary and cosmological temporalities, centring contemplation and action concerning the future in the present moment – the now – where future imaginaries are open to their inherent qualities: ineffability, doubt, instability, variability, and impermanence.

Doubting time

In the first lines of his treatise *Uji* [有時; "Being-Time"], Dōgen instructs us to cultivate doubt about our view of time and being. His philosophy of time has a striking

resemblance to St Augustine's contemplation on the nature of time: "So what is time? If no one asks me this, then I know; but if I am forced to explain it to someone who asks, then I do not know, though I will boldly maintain that I do know" (2018, pp. 254-255). Dōgen complements Augustine's thought by arguing that the temporal complexity of the present moment integrates the very process of doubting:

> Since a sentient being's doubtings of the many and various things unknown to him are naturally vague and indefinite, the course his doubtings take will probably not bring them to coincide with this present doubt. Nonetheless, the doubts themselves are, after all, none other than time (2002, p. 49).

This perspective underscores the inherent elusiveness of the present moment in Dōgen's framework of "being-time." The present is not a fixed point but a dynamic, fluid process that resists static definition and, as such, invites a continual process of doubt and reflection. Shohaku Okumura further elucidates this notion, writing that "There is always some gap between the actual experience of the present moment and our thoughts about the present moment and how we define it; the present moment is ungraspable even though it is the only actual moment of experience" (2010, p. 120). This gap between experience and conceptualisation aligns with Dōgen's notion of "being-time" where the present moment is both all-encompassing and elusive. For Dōgen, the present moment's ungraspability reinforces the need for a continual process of doubt and inquiry, emphasising that our understanding of "being-time" is always in flux and cannot be wholly captured by fixed concepts. Doubting is essential for actualising understanding beyond its logical form. Such actualisation, in Dōgen's view, is none other than the process of enlightenment or *nirvana*, which is always an immediate realisation, although we may struggle to pinpoint its exact location in the present moment. In Zen, this intense wonder – this open contemplative mode without preconceptions – is referred to as the "great doubt", which "brings us face-to-face with life just as it is without our conceptual overlay" (Roberts, 2018, p. 58).

The "Great Doubt" stands in stark contrast to the ways in which we engage with the Anthropocene and its complex, inscrutable temporalities. In an era that posits a fundamental upheaval of humanity's valuation systems, cognitive processes, and the very essence of meaning itself, doubt is replaced, again and again, by the expectation of certainty. The Anthropocene itself is a hyperconcept (adapting Timothy Morton's

view of Anthropocene "hyperobjects") that reveals contemporary society's unexamined conviction regarding the transformative power of names, ideas, and meanings, often overlooking the necessity of scrutinising the conceptual frameworks that underpin such convictions (Chang, forthcoming, pp. 1-2). This expectation results in the compulsion and, indeed, imposition of meaning onto the environment through layers of meaning that reflect societal values and desires.[1] In this light, the relentless oversaturation of meaning in modern industrial society, which permeates every level of the anthroposphere, biosphere, lithosphere, and atmosphere, serves as a defence mechanism against deeper existential fears – doubt, meaninglessness, void, and emptiness.

The Anthropocene crisis is not just a crisis of the abuse of meaning, but also a symptom of a profound existential fear, revealing the urgent need for a radical revaluation of our relationship with meaning and existence. Not surprisingly, in his book *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Slavoj Žižek describes the oversaturation of scientific dogmatic meaning within capitalist contexts, which "serves two properly ideological needs, those for hope and those for censorship, which were traditionally taken care of by religion." And he continues, "In a curious inversion, religion is one of the possible places from which one can deploy critical doubts about today's society. It has become one of the sites of resistance" (2008, p. 446). Considering time in the Anthropocene, science and technology can no longer be placed in opposition to religion, thereby avoiding the creation of an exclusionary divide marked by restrictive categorical distinctions. Within this framework, Dōgen's concept of "being-time" ensures that uncertainty remains integral to contemplation.

"Being-Time"

Dōgen wrote *Uji* ("Being-time") at the beginning of winter in 1240, while he was teaching at Kōshōji in Kyoto. It is one of the central and most complex fascicles of his larger work *Shōbōgenzō* (*The True Dharma Eye*). Using Zen dialectic, Dōgen questions common abstract notions of time and examines its multifaceted aspects, based on the foundational principle that time and being are inseparable in the immediate present of the self (the "I"). *U* means "existence" and *ji* means "time," so *uji* means "existent time," or "existence-time." Dōgen argues that Buddhism embodies

[1] Consider, here, capitalist production and resource extraction, e.g., the act of strip mining for coal.

realism; thus, the Buddhist conception of time is intrinsically realistic. As Shinshu Roberts explains, “uji” is “a full-circle journey … from conventional understanding to actualisation” (2018, p. 16). The essence of realisation lies in the actualisation of what is fully present in this moment, including the self. Dōgen addresses the misconception that realisation depends on sequential and causally linked time. Instead, he elucidates the passage of being-time as the simultaneous presencing of the entire world. This presencing, characterised by both independent and mutual arising,[2] represents the practice of *all beings* (universal)[3] and *being* (particular) making passage as being-time. Time is fundamentally intertwined with existence, and existence is anchored in the immediacy of time. The past and the future do not constitute true existent time; rather, only the present moment exemplifies existent time, where existence and time converge. Moreover, time is inherently linked to present action. Action is manifested within the temporal framework, and time is realised through action, which can be compared to concepts found in existentialist philosophy.

“Uji” begins with four couplets introducing the overall meaning of the text. The first two lines of the passage are attributed to Zen master Yüeh-shan Wei-yen, referred to here as “an old Buddha.” These lines originate from the *Ching-te Ch’uan Teng Lu* (*The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*), a compilation of Zen master stories by Shi Daoyuan in 1004. The remaining lines are believed to have been composed by Dōgen. These couplets illustrate the nonduality and totality of being-time, encompassing reality in both its particular and universal aspects while preserving the inherent uncertainty in contemplating time:

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[2] *Pratītyasamutpāda* (*dependent origination* or *co-arising*) is a foundational Buddhist doctrine stating that all phenomena (*dharmas*) arise in dependence on other phenomena. It posits that everything exists and ceases to exist based on the presence or absence of other conditions, contrasting with the Western concept of direct causation. Ontologically, the doctrine of dependent origination asserts that all current phenomena originate from preceding ones and influence future phenomena, highlighting the continuous and interdependent nature of existence. This concept is linked to the Buddhist understanding of rebirth, which occurs through a process conditioned by various phenomena and their relations rather than a permanent self or soul. As an epistemological principle, it suggests that no phenomena are permanent or stable (Sanskrit: *anitya*), and nothing has any self-nature or essence (Skt: *anatta*), thereby aligning with the doctrine of *emptiness* (Skt: *śūnyatā,* शून्यता).

[3] “All beings” [Japanese: *shitsuu*, 悉] refers to the Buddhist concept of *Buddha-nature* (Jap.: 仏性, *busshō*), the inherent potential within all sentient beings to become a Buddha, or the idea that every being already possesses a pure Buddha essence. The term “Buddha-nature” is a common English translation for various Mahayana Buddhist concepts, including *tathāgatagarbha* and *buddhadhātu*, as well as *sugatagarbha* and *buddhagarbha*. *Tathāgatagarbha* translates to “the womb” or “embryo” of the “thus-gone one” (*tathāgata*) and can also mean “containing a tathāgata.” *Buddhadhātu* can be understood as “buddha-element,” “buddha-realm,” or “buddha-substrate.”

An old Buddha said:
For the time being, I stand astride the highest mountain peaks.
For the time being, I move on the deepest depths of the ocean floor.
For the time being, I'm three heads and eight arms.
For the time being, I'm eight feet or sixteen feet.
For the time being, I'm a staff or a whisk.
For the time being, I'm a pillar or a lantern.
For the time being, I'm Mr. Chang or Mr. Li.
For the time being, I'm the great earth and heavens above (2002, p. 48).[4]

In the original Chinese text, the characters *u-ji (*有時), which translate to "for the time being" and are repeated at the beginning of each line, mean *aru toki*, or "at a certain time," "sometimes." These meanings objectify time, detaching it from being and rendering it a phenomenon that emerges from the future and vanishes into the past, while being is confined to a specific, limited span within this infinite continuum. Dōgen's use of the phrase carries a deeper meaning than simply "at this time." Interpreting the two characters as the compound term *uji*, rather than as an idiomatic phrase, produces the more universal meaning "being-time." The compound "being-time" can be understood to signify either a being's time, a time's being, or all being-time (Roberts, 2018, p. 37). Hee-Jin Kim argues that this expression reveals the "nondual intimacy of existence and time" (2004, p. 151). To clarify the inseparability of time and being, Dōgen reveals a latent meaning: each "certain time," any and every time, is a direct manifestation of being, and vice versa. The translation of the expression into English as "for the time being" seeks to capture some of these nuanced meanings.[5]

After each repetition, the individual moments, things, or events depicted in the four couplets are referred to by Dōgen as *jū-hōi*, or "dharma positions."[6] A dharma

[4] I opted for quoting Norman Waddell and Masao Abe's translation of "Uji" as I deem it to be more creative and engaging to contemporary readers, making the text more prone to a myriad of interpretations which, in turn, enrich the amplitude and complexity of the text. I also resort to Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross's (1994) commentaries that accompany their own translation, which are incredibly useful for the diversity of interpretations of the text.

[5] The translation of this expression also resonates with contemporary representations of time and existence in literature such as Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013).

[6] The uppercase word "Dharma" is often referred to as the teaching of the Buddha, which expresses the universal truth. The Dharma already existed before the birth of the historical Buddha, who is no more than a manifestation of it. Consequently, Dharma foregrounds the timelessness and transcendental infinity of "being-time". On the other hand, the lowercase "dharma" refers to the

position represents a singular moment, state of being, or occurrence that lacks a fixed duration. It has four essential aspects: 1. It integrates all being-time – a being's time and time's being – in this very moment. This is the complete nonduality of things, existence, and time. A dharma position expresses both the universal state of all being-time, that is, the inclusive nature of everything taken as a whole, and a particular being-time; 2. It is characterised by mutual interpenetration and interdependence with other dharma positions, reflecting their interrelated, impermanent, and fleeting nature; 3. It embodies a transient and impermanent moment, thing, or event of being-time; 4. While it exists within the framework of past, present, and future, a dharma position is not bound or defined by these temporal categories.

Each dharma position retains its particular and independent nature. Building upon this understanding, Dōgen, in "Genjōkōan" ("Manifesting Suchness"; or "Genjō-kōan, The Realized Universe"), suggests that a fluid and all-encompassing dharma position simultaneously represents its "instantaneous arising and vanishing" (Nishijima & Cross, 1994, p. 34). Dōgen uses the metaphor of firewood to elucidate this idea, stating that once firewood turns to ash, it cannot revert back to firewood. However, he cautions against perceiving ash as the future of firewood and firewood as its past. Instead, each state exists in its own dharma position, with its past and future inherently severed. This reflects the principle that each state abides independently within the Dharma, irrespective of linear temporal connections. Masao Abe expands on this by stating,

> Each and every time (for example, yesterday), because it is simultaneously the manifestation of the total dynamism of all times while abiding in its own dharma-stage, cannot be correctly seen as passing into another time (for example, today). The relationship of one time and another time must be seen not as a matter of passing away, but as *passageless-passage* (*kyōryaku*) (1992, p. 84).

Abe underscores the idea that all moments exist independently while simultaneously reflecting the entirety of time. In this context, the reference to "mountain peaks" in the initial four couplets of "Being-time" symbolises differentiation [*suchness*, Sanskrit:

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manifestation of reality and phenomena, i.e., "the fully embodied totality of myriad things/beings as a moment of being-time" (Roberts, 2018, p. 34).

tathātā, तथाता], whereas “ocean depths” signify undifferentiated unity or wholeness [*emptiness*, Skt. *śūnyatā*, शून्यता]. The expression “three heads and eight arms” represents the figure of *ashura* or fighting demon, indicative of unenlightened existence in general. In contrast, “eight feet” and “sixteen feet” refer to the Buddha, Shakyamuni, in seated and standing postures, respectively. The reference to “Mr. Chang or Mr. Li” is analogous to the phrase “Tom, Dick, and Harry,” representing the ordinariness and minuteness of particular individuals in contrast to the vastness of “the great earth and heavens above” (2002, p. 48). These paradoxical states of existence illustrate the nondual nature of Dogen’s concept of “being-time.” From the standpoint of nonduality, being-time is a singularity, complete and lacking nothing. We can conceptualise reality as an interwoven, interactive process instead of as a collection of separate things or events. Although events may appear to occur sequentially and according to a causal linearity, their true essence embodies the totality of all movements. This totality is non-sequential, as it is nondual and all-encompassing.

Dōgen’s philosophical view also aligns with the idea that reality encompasses a complete and unbroken continuum, where every dharma position is “interconnecting, interpenetrating, impermanent, and fleeting [and so,] it functions within the context of all other dharma positions” (Roberts, 2018, p. 41). This perspective challenges the conventional separation between different states of existence and highlights the inherent unity of all experiences. As Dōgen writes in “Zenki” (*All Functions*), “life is what I am making it, and I am what life is making me … life is the self and self is life” (1994, p. 286). The interdependence of all dharma positions underscores the notion that both moments of enlightenment (*nirvana*) and delusion (the cycle of birth and death that constitutes *samsara*) are not isolated phenomena but integral manifestations of “being-time.” Indeed, as Roberts suggests, our immediate experience contains both realisation and delusion:

> When we are responding with our buddha-mind, where does the demon mind go? When we are responding with delusion, where does our realized mind go? Or we could ask, “when we respond skillfully to a situation, where does our selfish mind go, and when we respond unskillfully, where does our compassionate mind go?” Both are present, although we generally experience either one or the other (2018, p. 41).

For this reason, a Zen Buddhist approach that expects sequential spiritual attainment – such as transforming delusion into enlightenment through a particular practice – is ultimately illusory. Instead, Zen practice unfolds within the entirety of reality as it emerges in the present moment, creating a continuous flow of activity that defies clear-cut distinctions between past and future, or between then and now.

Time, in this context, comprises both universal and unique moments that encapsulate all being-times, indicating that each present moment transcends enlightenment and delusion. Dōgen's concept illustrates that every moment, regardless of its perceived clarity or obscurity, is an expression of the total reality that transcends individual experiences. In this manner, the self is entirely present in the current moment and the entirety of time. Time "does not carry us along. We are time itself. Time resides within the essential nature of our being" (Roberts, 2018, p. 70). Indeed, this resonates with Dōgen's writing, in "Uji", that "each grass and each form itself is the entire world" (Tanahashi, 1985, p. 77) and with the seventh-century Chinese Huayan School's understanding that "to know one thing is to know all things" (in Roberts, 2018, p. 73). Steven Heine further illuminates this perspective by likening the belief in sequential time – past, present, and future – to creating a gulf between oneself and one's experience, obliterating "the immediacy and comprehensive totality of the here-and-now" (1985, p. 53). This way of thinking not only detaches individuals from their own lived experiences but also from the interdependent reality of all beings, thereby reinforcing the illusion of separation from the fundamental unity of existence.

Thiền (Vietnamese Zen) Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh developed the concept of *interbeing* to evince the relationship between interdependence in space and time, comparing it to the Zen notion of impermanence and, consequently, to the notion of emptiness or *śūnyatā*. He argues that.

> the insight of interbeing is that nothing can exist by itself alone, that each thing exists only in relation to everything else. The insight of impermanence is that nothing is static, nothing stays the same. Interbeing means emptiness of a separate self, however impermanence also means emptiness of a separate

> self. Looking from the perspective of *space* we call emptiness 'interbeing;' looking from the perspective of *time* we call it 'impermanence' (2017, p. 45).[7]

Nhat Hahn's concept of interbeing aligns closely with Dōgen's understanding of *impermanence*, which he articulates through the term *impermanence-Buddha-nature* (*Mujōbusshō*, 無常仏性). For Dōgen, Buddha-nature is the true nature of reality not as a "potentiality to be actualized sometime in the future, but the original, fundamental nature of beings" (Abe, 1989, p. 33). As such, it consists of impermanence, becoming, and vast emptiness. Impermanence-Buddha-nature underscores the unity of Buddha-nature and its emptying (non-substantiality) in the concept of *no-Buddha-nature* (*Mubusshō*, 無仏性). Abe observes that, in relation to impermanence [*mujō*], Dōgen employs the Sanskrit concept of *anitya*, which means 'impermanence, mutability, transiency' and 'has been one of the key concepts of Buddhism from its very beginning, one of the three basic Buddhist principles or Dharma seals – "Whatever is phenomenal is impermanent".' (1989, pp. 48-49).

While traditional Buddhism has emphasised the contrast between the inconstancy of phenomena and the constancy of the Buddha-nature or the *Tathāgata*,[8] Dōgen foreground that true *nirvana* can only be achieved by a detachment from the idea of *nirvana* as transcendence of impermanence. Instead, enlightenment is realised through a process of liberation from both impermanence and permanence. This is achieved by transcending nirvana and engaging with the sufferings of the ever-changing world (1989, p. 49), embodying the true meaning of enlightenment in Mahayana Buddhism[9], that is, no attachment to either *samsara* or *nirvana*. Dōgen argues that

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[7] Should this passage confound readers, it is necessary to note that interbeing occurs both within different spaces and timescales. For instance, the hydrogen atoms in our bodies were formed in the Big Bang while carbon and oxygen in us as in all things are the products of the nuclear fusion reactors that we call stars. We are dependent, through time and space, upon heaven, earth, and everything in between; "we are dependent upon and enmeshed with all being for all time, at this moment. This great life of the cosmos is just the everyday life of the common person" (2018, p. 48).

[8] The honorific title of the Buddha and those who have achieved enlightenment. The term is often translated as either "one who has thus gone" (*tathā-gata*), "one who has thus come" (*tathā-āgata*), or sometimes, "one who has thus not gone" (*tathā-agata*). These expressions indicate that the Tathāgata transcends all comings and goings, all transitory phenomena such as suffering [*dukkha*] and the cycle of birth and death [*samsara*].

[9] Japanese Zen, including the Sōtō Zen School founded by Dōgen, is part of the Mahayana tradition.

> The very impermanence of grasses, trees, bushes, and forests is the Buddha-nature; the very impermanence of people, things, body, mind is the Buddha-nature; states, lands, mountains, rivers are impermanent, because they are the Buddha-nature. The supreme and complete enlightenment is impermanent because it is the Buddha-nature. Great nirvana is the Buddha-nature because it is impermanent (Abe & Waddell, 1976, p. 93).

Dōgen's concept of impermanence-Buddha-nature thus transcends the traditional dichotomy of Being (Buddha) and Nothing (impermanence itself) by emphasising a process of Becoming. As Abe suggests, Becoming 'takes place in the boundless, dimensionless dimension of "all beings" [*shitsuu*, 悉] which is truly cosmological' (1989, p. 54). Dōgen posits that everything arises simultaneously in a state of mutual interdependence and interpenetration, where each phenomenon is intrinsically connected to and constitutive of the entire universe. This holistic view of reality challenges the conventional sequential understanding of causality, suggesting instead a multidimensional model where all moments and beings are interconnected and unobstructed. From this perspective, which incorporates nonduality, mutual identity, and interdependence, Dōgen's "being-time" evinces that time has no beginning, middle, or end, that is, there is no distinction between past, present, and future; only the ever-present now of being-time. Past, present, and future coexist within each moment. Considering this, how can we conciliate Dōgen's understanding with the complex timescales of the Anthropocene?

Future Imaginaries of "Being-Time" in the Age of Climate Change

In the Mahayana tradition Maitreya Bodhisattva holds a significant position as he is foretold by Śākyamuni (Gautama Buddha) to become the next incarnate Buddha. This prophecy is particularly prominent in chapters 15 and 16 of the Lotus Sutra, where Maitreya plays a pivotal role in the narrative concerning the emergence of bodhisattvas and the revelation of Śākyamuni's extensive life span. However, far beyond the limits of this narrative, the archetypal figure of Maitreya has been a primary source for an expanded view of temporality within the Mahayana tradition. He embodies the potential yet to be realised, representing the future attainment of Buddhahood while still remaining a mere reflection of this anticipated future self. Iconographically,

Maitreya is often depicted as residing in *Tusita Heaven*,[10] where he patiently awaits his next rebirth and contemplates his future mission to liberate all sentient beings and achieve Buddhahood [see figures 1 and 2]. Traditional accounts emphasise the extensive duration of Maitreya's anticipation before his enlightenment. Predictions regarding the timing of his future Buddhahood vary widely; some sources project this event to occur in the year 4456 CE, while others suggest it may be as distant as 5,760 million years from now (Tanahashi, 2004, p. 86). Regardless of the exact timeframe, Maitreya's enduring patience highlights a profound perspective on time. His presence invokes significant considerations about the future and encourages reflection on how current actions might impact future generations.

Figure 1. Painting of Maitreya Bodhisattva on his throne. Sanskrit Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra manuscript written in the Ranjana script. India, early 12th century, Public Domain.

[10] Tuṣita (in Sanskrit) or Tusita (in Pāli) is one of the six heavenly realms within the Desire Realm (*Kāmadhātu*). It is positioned between the *Yāma* and *Nirmāṇarati* heavens. Like other heavenly realms, Tuṣita can be accessed through meditation. This is the heaven where the Bodhisattva Śvetaketu lived before his rebirth on Earth as Gautama, the historical Buddha. It is also the residence of the Bodhisattva Nātha ("Protector"), who will be reborn as the future Buddha, Maitreya.

Figure 2. Stone relief carving of Tusita Heaven, carved during the Kushan Dynasty Nesnad, Pakistan, Kushan dynasty, 2nd-3rd century, CC BY-SA 3.0

Maitreya not only represents vast ranges of time – deep time – in the Mahayana imagination, but also symbolises a hopeful vision for the future, reassuring followers of an impending new Buddha era. As Tanahashi observes, Maitreya followers have occasionally taken steps to improve the world in anticipation of his arrival, thus translating their concern for the future into tangible social reforms (2004, p. 87).

As a symbol of an uncertain but hopeful future, Maitreya clashes directly with the temporal structure of the Anthropocene, which tends to be retrospective and predictive, positioning the future as a continuation of the past's trajectory, and so limiting the scope for envisioning alternative futures. Julia Nordblad argues that conceptualising the Anthropocene as a transition is problematic since it implies that the main task is to trace a course from one predetermined state to another rather than to envision alternative desirable futures, understanding the reasons behind their desirability, identifying the beneficiaries, and determining the means by which these futures can be realised (2021, p. 335). As Nordblad argues, the Anthropocene invokes geological time by "simply zooming out" (p. 341) and it frames the present from this geological perspective by employing a "low-resolution optics and peculiar future perfect temporality", thereby offering limited insight into the temporal dynamics of the crisis we are currently facing (p. 347) and the role of the present moment in mitigating

such crisis. This perspective can lead to a form of temporal fatalism, where the possibility of different outcomes is overshadowed by the inevitability of current trends extending into the future. By collapsing the difference between the past and that which is yet avoidable, the Anthropocene overlooks the importance of imagining, planning, and critically deliberating the future.

New Materialist scholars such as Karen Barad uniquely challenge this linear and deterministic conception of time, aligning most closely with Mahayana Buddhism and its profound implications for ecological change. Barad's concept of "diffraction" provides a way of thinking about time that is non-linear, multiple, and complex, where different temporalities overlap, interfere, and co-constitute one another (2007, p. 91). Diffraction suggests that just as waves overlap to create complex patterns, different times and futures are entangled with one another, creating new patterns of reality. It emphasises the focus on the processes of differentiation rather than the final outcomes or the permutations themselves. Moreover, it highlights the patterns that emerge as phenomena continuously interact and diffract through each other. Diffraction is neither a starting point nor an endpoint, but rather an ongoing 'from the middle' that generates an infinite range of possibilities arising from a phenomenon when it is momentarily "cut" (2007, p. 80) into a specific shape, form, or difference. This understanding could help reframe Maitreya's significance not only as a figure of a distant future but as an active temporal force that diffracts through the present, shaping it in multiple, non-linear ways. In this sense, new materialism provides a framework to understand Maitreya's role as more than a marker of a future event; rather, he represents a temporal entanglement that disrupts linear chronologies and invites a reconceptualisation of time as relational, emergent, and co-constitutive.

Just as Barad argues that time, space, and matter are inseparable – "spacetimemattering" (p. 179) – Maitreya's presence in the Tusita Heaven can be seen as a "becoming" that is continually in process, blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future. This aligns with Dōgen's concept of "being-time," which posits that the present moment inherently contains both the past and the future. Unlike the linear progression often associated with the Anthropocene, where time is seen as a sequence of events leading inexorably from the past to the future, Dōgen's being-time emphasises the fluid and dynamic nature of time, where each moment is a manifestation of all times and not bound by a linear understanding of causality. Dōgen explains that we often perceive spiritual awakening as a process occurring in

sequential time: the past is delusion, the present involves working to overcome delusion, and the future is when realisation is achieved. Instead, enlightenment is realised in the present moment, not the future. All necessary elements for realisation are already present, contrary to the view that one must obtain something beyond their current state.

Similarly, as Barad suggests, time is “intra-active” and always implicated in the making and remaking of the material world (2007, p. 180). This view parallels Dōgen’s teaching, which emphasises that awakening is not something that can occur in a non-present future; it is a dynamic process that happens in the present experience of practice, without excluding past or future, or any other aspect of time. Juxtaposing the work of three major figures in Western thought – Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson – Elizabeth Grosz further supports this view by rejecting teleological conceptions of time that sees it as a journey toward a fixed endpoint, such as utopia or dystopia. Instead, she proposes understanding time as an open-ended, non-linear, and ”untimely” creative force that allows for multiple, unforeseen futures (2004, p. 11). This rejection of teleological temporality complements my argument that the Mahayana tradition, through the figure of Maitreya, and Dōgen’s understanding of “being-time,” resists and counteracts the linear, deterministic trajectory of the Anthropocene. Grosz’s perspective represents a refusal to accept a future that merely extends the current trends and opens up possibilities for new kinds of temporal experiences and realities to emerge.

By anchoring itself in a future where all significant events are predetermined, the Anthropocene effectively negates any potential for an openness of the future that allows for political action and imagination. Amitav Ghosh argues that, beyond posing a challenge “to our commonsense understandings”, the climate crisis is ultimately a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination (2016, p. 9). In this context, the open future must “be thought of as one of the finite resources that will only get scarcer in the twenty-first century” (Nordblad, 2021, p. 346). Furthermore, French sociologists Francis Chateauraynaud and Josquin Debaz view the future not as a mere object of prediction but as a project of collective imagination and deliberation (2019, p. 139) encompassing a plurality of alternatives.

In this context, Dōgen’s concept of being-time, offers a more nuanced understanding of temporality that aligns with the idea of an imagined, open, and undetermined future. Roberts aptly describes that

> Realization happens at a particular being-time: a flower held up, the morning star rising. This moment is also all being's-time's birth. It is the activity of all buddhas expressed through the present moment. Nothing is left out, nothing is obstructed or hidden. This is the aspect of being-time as nonduality, as both finite and infinite. This is a moment's passageless-passage (2018, pp. 200-201).

Delusion and realisation coexist without interference. Practice itself embodies realisation. As Roberts suggests, the way-seeking mind and its emergence are interrelated, just like the interdependence of the wave and the ocean: "It is not an either-or situation. Both are true at the same time, and both are facilitating the production of the other" (2018, p. 68). This perspective is evident in Dōgen's interpretation of Maitreya. He mentions a story in which Nanquan Puyuan (in Japanese, Nansen) asserted that "There is no Maitreya up in heaven and no Maitreya down on the earth." In his comments to his students, Dōgen echoed Nanquan's words and added, "Maitreya is not Maitreya; [and so] Maitreya is Maitreya. Even though this is so, doesn't everybody want to see Maitreya?" Dōgen then raised his whisk and remarked, "You have met with Maitreya. Already having met him, everyone, try to say whether Maitreya exists or does not exist" (Tanahashi, 2004, p. 90). Through this, Dōgen illustrates and invokes the experience of Maitreya's presence, as well as the ambiguity of his existence in the past, present, or future.

Unlike many Mahayana interpretations of Maitreya's enlightenment as a potentiality to be actualised sometime in the distant future, Dōgen's teaching emphasises that awakening is not something that can occur in a non-present future. It is a dynamic process that happens in the present experience of practice, without excluding past or future, or any other aspect of time. As he explains, it is "not that the lifespan of the Buddha has prevailed only in the past, but that what is called *vast numbers* is a total inclusive attainment. What is called *still now* is the total lifespan" (Tanahashi, 2004, p. 80). [Tanahashi's italics]. This holistic view of time aligns with the idea of a collective and imaginative approach to the future as embedded in the present and in the continuum of "being-time," where each moment holds the potential for transformation and realisation. This understanding is also reflected in the concept of the "eternal now," where "eternal" does not imply unchanging, but rather that this

transient moment continues perpetually. It is the infinite presencing of all being-time. Roberts observes that:

> Each moment is born with us and includes all activity occurring everywhere, even if we cannot see it. Within this finite infinity, when we die, we are not dead. When we are born, we are not born. From this view, the self is not the self. The self is all being(s), and all being(s) are the self. The self is the form of the mountains. The self is blinking and raising the eyebrows. When we allow the totality of being to presence itself to us and we to it, something special happens. … This is the Tathāgata's appearance (2018, p. 197).

Just as a being's existence spans all space, its temporal experience spans all time. And yet, the eternal now is not a moment that isolates us from our interconnected relations; rather, it encompasses the entirety of existence and serves as the foundation for our ethically enlightened response. Our experiences are inherently multifaceted. Nonetheless, human beings frequently perceive these experiences exclusively from an anthropocentric viewpoint, neglecting the varied perspectives of non-human or more-than-human beings. In reality, we contribute to non-human temporalities as much as these temporalities influence our own.

The concept of the "eternal now," or being-time, offers a fresh perspective that addresses and counters the Anthropocene notion of "time out of joint" by subverting the conventional understandings of synchronicity and asynchronicity. By proposing a unified temporal dimension in which all forms of temporality converge into a continuous present, being-time challenges the fragmented temporalities of the Anthropocene. Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified a significant challenge in reconciling human-historical time with geological time, emphasising the difficulty of aligning human-centric perspectives with broader geological and ecological rhythms. Moreover, Chakrabarty highlights the difficulty in developing "a mode of thinking about the present that would attempt to hold together these two rather different senses of time" (2018, p. 5). In this sense, being-time starkly contrasts with the fragmented and discordant temporalities of the Anthropocene. It highlights the limitations of the dichotomous synchronicity/asynchronicity framework, which often fail to account for the complex, interwoven nature of temporal experiences across different scales. By offering a more

cohesive understanding, being-time transcends these conventional temporal dichotomies.

New materialism adds further depth to this discussion by framing time not as a linear, external dimension but as something intimately entangled with material processes. Barad's concept of "intra-action" suggests that entities do not pre-exist their relations; rather, they emerge through their interactions. In this framework, time itself is not an independent or inert backdrop but is dynamically co-constituted through material encounters and events (2007, p. 179). This perspective can be mapped onto Dōgen's understanding of the "eternal now" as a temporal space where past, present, and future are not isolated from one another but are co-present, interacting, and continually reshaping each other. The "eternal now" is an example of what Barad refers to as "intra-active becoming," where time, matter, and space are constantly co-creating reality. The "eternal now," as a concept, challenges the fatalistic tendencies of Anthropocene thinking, which often reduces the future to a mere extension of the past and present trends. By insisting that every moment is infused with the potential for new beginnings, it aligns with new materialism's understanding of time as an emergent, entangled process that is always open to change. Just as Barad's theory of diffraction proposes that different times can overlap and create new patterns of reality, the "eternal now" suggests that the future is not predetermined but is continually shaped by the interplay of past, present, and future within each moment. Thus, integrating the "eternal now" or "being-time" with new materialist perspectives offers a powerful critique of the Anthropocene's temporal limitations. It invites us to see time not as a linear progression but as an open, dynamic field where multiple futures are possible.

Conclusion

Dōgen's concept of being-time provides a vital counter-narrative to the deterministic temporalities of the Anthropocene. By emphasising the dynamic and interconnected nature of time, Dōgen's teachings invite a revaluation of how we perceive and engage with the future. This perspective encourages a more active and imaginative approach to shaping our collective futures. Integrating this Zen temporal framework into contemporary discourse on climate change and the Anthropocene can help foster a more resilient and responsive relationship with the Earth and its intricate temporalities.

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