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“Better Wrong Than Sloppy”

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IN a review of *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* (Vol. XXXI, no. 2 [1998], pp. 295–307), Jeff Shore singles out my contribution to this volume as generally excellent, but in one significant respect, sloppy: “Carter is experimenting with paradoxical language in his essay, but that’s no excuse for sloppiness.” Disquieting as it is to have one’s scholarship labeled “sloppy,” the pacification of my brittle ego alone would not warrant a rebuttal to be paraded before the readers of this Journal.

It is my contention, however, that there is a good deal more at stake here, perhaps a basic philosophic disagreement, or even an ideological difference which ought to be examined and discussed. The substance of the charge is that I urged that “we must empty Emptiness itself,” whereas Abe more correctly states that “Emptiness must empty itself.” Shore concludes, “Big difference—heaven and earth have just changed places.” Well, let me first say more clearly what it was that I had in mind when I uttered the “we,” and then go on to examine this alleged transposition of heaven and earth.

My essay was about how I had come to understand, at least more clearly if not anything like altogether clearly, what is meant when one uses the term “Emptiness,” or “Nothingness.” I was describing my own journey, in the hopes that it might be of some use to others, and as a way of sharing a bit of my history with Abe-sensei, who had helped me come to see and think more clearly about these difficult notions. I described how we had tried to diagram the ultimate, and how each diagram had at first seemed adequate, and then came to be rejected by us as lacking in one way or another. Nearly a dozen such diagrams were proposed, with none of them finding complete acceptance, and then we laughed like kids at the futility of it all, with Abe-

sensei finally remarking that this was something that had always resulted when he tried to talk about ultimate reality.

It was a process of revising, deepening, re-thinking and re-conceptualizing, while knowing that Heidegger was especially right with respect to the ineffable ultimate, that all revealing is at the same time a concealing. Still, there is progress to be made, for while it is always a mistake to think that one has grasped either Emptiness or the Buddha walking down the street, it is equally a mistake to give up and settle for the first notion that arises. One must be willing to "empty" one's diagrams and understandings, and to try again, knowing full well that the end is never "the truth," but rather the process of deepening and immersing oneself in the process itself. It is akin to the notion of self, which begins with the recognition that the self is empty. Hermeneutically speaking, one has to empty the self, to de-substantialize it, to de-individualize it in the wider field of interconnectedness, to de-thingify it. Of course, we don't actually empty it: it is always already empty. And yet, in and as experience, it continues to empty "itself" as a process moving from moment to moment, awareness to awareness, and self-concept to self-concept. We are never twice the same, and yet there is a continuity in this series of discontinuities. You can never step into the same self twice, to use Heraclitus's dictum for another purpose altogether, for fresh experience is always flowing in upon "you." And yet, the "self," like the river, nonetheless remains as a continuity of discontinuities. Ueda Shizuteru states this view convincingly: "... the self is never 'there,' but is at each moment in the process of transformation, now losing every trace of itself in nothingness, now blooming selflessly with the flowers and like one of them, now meeting another and making the encounter into its own self. . . . It does not portray a permanent identity with itself in itself. . . ." ¹ "Empty the self," we might well say, in trying to show that only by emptying the self of its substantial and thing-like characteristics will we ever come to know the "real" self. Furthermore, just as the truly selfless self as process "is never able to be fixed as an object or image," it "is also the case with absolute nothingness." ²

Similarly, we must empty Emptiness of all substantiality: it is not a thing; it is not to be reified Platonically. ³ Again, it is Ueda who states this succinctly: "... absolute

¹ Ueda Shizuteru, "'Nothingness' in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism," in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, Frederick Franck, ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), p. 163.

² Ibid.

³ Abe Masao, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives, eds. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 49: "Accordingly one God as absolute good cannot be accepted in Buddhism because, speaking from the perspective of dependent co-origination, a notion such as the one God as the absolute good who must be independent is nothing but a reification and substantialization of something ultimate as the only entity that has its own being."

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nothingness, the nothingness that dissolves substance-thinking, must not be clung to as nothingness. It must not be taken as a kind of substance, or even as the nihilum of a kind of 'minus substance.' The important thing is the de-substantializing dynamic of nothingness, the nothingness of nothingness."⁴

Shore admonishes me for not being careful about the words I use, and yet he pointedly emphasizes that I have exchanged heaven and earth, putting the one where the other should be. This is an odd assuredness on his part, especially given the constant refrain in Buddhism that nirvana is samsara, and samsara nirvana. Indeed, Abe himself writes that "We are always involved in the ceaseless emptying movement of Sunyata, for there is nothing outside it. And yet, in another sense, we are always totally embracing this ceaseless movement of Sunyata within ourselves. We are Sunyata at each and every moment of our lives."⁵ This is a powerful interpretation, and it seems to me to legitimize the use of "we" in a profoundly Buddhist sense. Our own journeys to wisdom are the journeys of Emptiness itself. It is within us, with the *basho* of each focus of consciousness, that Emptiness arises for us. We are Sunyata, we are heaven, and Nakamura Hajime's insight that the Japanese regard the phenomenal as absolute echoes Abe's account.⁶ In the non-dual realm of human experience, "we and it" give way to the glorious chant of nirvana as samsara: heaven is earth, and earth is heaven, and ever the twain shall meet. Abe continues, "... Sunyata is nothing but the true self and the true self is nothing but true Sunyata. Apart from the absolute present-right here, right now-this dynamical identity of self and Sunyata cannot be fully realized."⁷

Therefore, in our attempts to dimly comprehend the meaning and nature of ultimate reality as Emptiness, "we must empty Emptiness itself and keep everything nonsubstantial and in the flow of movement in being-time. We must also empty beingtime so that it points to the going on of events and then empty the event of any fixity or substance." I still maintain this. But should it seem that I have lost sight of the fact that while nirvana is samsara, nirvana is still nirvana, and samsara is still samsara, I went on to state that "Nothingness is the empty, or the emptying, or the filling and emptying, or the empty as full, or the emptied as filling, and the filled as emptying-for it is the process that one is to focus on and come to grasp." Perhaps the ideological difference between Shore and myself is that his emphasis is on the distinctiveness of heaven and earth, samsara and nirvana, and mine appears to be on the identity of the two. Perhaps between the two of us we might come closer still to an understanding of what the term "Emptiness" means. But then again, I could be wrong.

⁴ Ueda, "'Nothingness' in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism," p. 161.

⁵ Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 28.

⁶ Nakamura Hajime, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India-China-Tibet-Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1964), pp. 350-372.

⁷ Ueda, "'Nothingness' in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism," p.28.