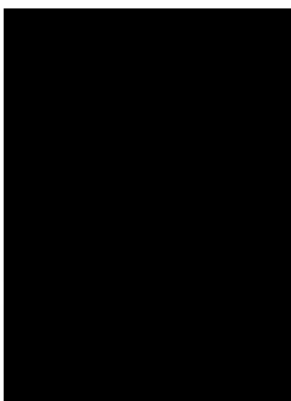


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OBITUARY

In Memoriam—Abe Masao (1915–2006)



The world of interfaith dialogue lost a towering figure when Abe Masao passed away on September 10, 2006. Those of us who were fortunate enough to have been his students, colleagues, and dialogue partners will remember Abe-sensei for many things, not the least of which was his gentle openness. Whenever people questioned him, he listened intently and took their concerns seriously, regardless of their academic credentials or the sophistication of their questions. It was this receptivity, in concert with his knowledge, insights, and philosophical acumen, that earned Abe his stature as the most important Buddhist in modern interfaith dialogue and the main transmitter of Zen thought to the West following the death of D. T. Suzuki.

The warm compassion and penetrating thought for which Abe is known are grounded in the fervent religious quest he pursued in his youth. Born into a Shin Buddhist family in Osaka, he wrestled with moral and religious questions throughout his formative years. (Abe later said in retrospect, “I came to realize that while I was living my life I was unconsciously hurting others.”) Gripped by feelings of sinfulness, he turned to Shinran’s words in the *Tannishō* 歎異抄 (A Record in Lament of Divergences) for answers. While a student of Economics and Law at Osaka Commercial University, however, his faith in Amida collided with his rational intellect. Though longing to seek a resolution of this dilemma through study under renowned philosophers at Kyoto University, he bowed to family circumstances and took a job with a company in Kobe.

From day one, Abe found his work meaningless, and in 1941 he made the courageous decision to quit his job and head to Kyoto. As he later commented, “To do this, I was forced to abandon almost everything I had acquired, privately and publicly, because I was reproached for breaking family solidarity and for being an unpatriotic person who began to study philosophy in the midst of a national crisis despite his ability to contribute to the nation.”

While studying Western philosophy at Kyoto University with Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji, Abe's religious questioning took on a new urgency, for his Pure Land faith was immediately challenged by another professor, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi. To Abe, Hisamatsu exhibited a powerful Zen awakening, and his critique of Abe's Pure Land religiosity led Abe to doubt his faith. Abe turned to Zen practice, both under traditional Zen masters and in a Zen group that he and other students founded with Hisamatsu.¹ Abe threw himself into Zen meditation retreats with ferocity, at one point yelling, "It's all a lie!" and another time charging across the meditation hall to grab Hisamatsu by the collar in an attempt to grasp his awakened way of being.² Eventually, as he probed what Hisamatsu referred to as the Formless True Self, Abe resolved his religious questions.

After completing his academic studies and teaching briefly at several universities in Kyoto, Abe landed a job in 1952 at Nara University of Education, where he taught Western philosophy for the next twenty-eight years. This tenure featured numerous trips overseas to study, teach, and lecture. In 1955, for example, he headed to New York on a Rockefeller Foundation Research Fellowship, and for the next two years he studied at Columbia University, in part with D. T. Suzuki,³ and at Union Theological Seminary, under Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Abe later taught for one or more semesters at such places as Princeton, Purdue, University of Chicago, Claremont Graduate School, University of Hawai'i, Pacific School of Religion, Carleton College, and Haverford College. In the 1980s, Abe and his main dialogue partner over the years, the renowned process theologian John B. Cobb Jr., started the North American Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter. He and Cobb were also instrumental in the founding of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. In these and other venues, Abe explored a range of issues with Cobb and other leading religious thinkers, including Hans Küng, John Hick, David Tracy, Jürgen Moltmann, Langdon Gilkey, Gordon Kaufman, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Richard Rubenstein, and Eugene Borowitz.

Abe's thought and his contributions to interfaith dialogue and comparative philosophy are too complex to summarize adequately in this brief commem-

¹ The Gakudō Dōjo, which in the 1950s evolved into the F.A.S. Society.

² In a volume Donald W. Mitchell edited, *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1998), serious Zen practitioners Steve Antinoff and Jeff Shore write about Abe's committed practice of Zen.

³ In recognition of Suzuki as one of his key mentors, Abe edited a book of essays, *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986).

oration, yet to a large extent his thinking revolved around the Buddhist construct of *śūnyatā*, usually translated by him as Emptiness. Through his study of Western and Buddhist philosophy, encounter with modern nihilism and scientism, and dialogue with Christians, Jews, and other Buddhists, Abe advanced *śūnyatā* as the metaphysical and spiritual foundation of all religions, including monotheistic traditions, and as the optimal basis on which humanity could, while dealing with anti-religious ideologies and inter-religious conflict, formulate a new global community beyond nation-states.

In “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata,” probably his most widely-read essay, he makes these and related arguments after examining the Christian notion of *kenosis*—divine self-emptying—as a fruitful point of comparison with *śūnyatā*. Along the way, he outlines the Buddhist call for people to “empty” themselves and thereby break through karma, turn ignorance into wisdom, and deliver themselves beyond the realm of ordinary discriminating thought—including dualistic ethical reflection—and into the depth dimension of *śūnyatā*. In his engagement with *kenosis*, Abe also highlights the ethical facets of *śūnyatā* and on this basis reflects on the will, evil, and history while making a provocative argument about relative ethical responsibility and absolute religious responsibility for such historical events as the Holocaust.

Those who encountered Abe also benefited from his arguments about the Zen approach to life and death; the “self-awakened cosmology” in Zen; the reversibility of time; Non-Being and Buddhist Nothingness (*mu*); Nietzsche’s nihilism; Whitehead’s metaphysics; negation in Tillich’s theology; true non-discrimination as the double negation of discrimination and non-discrimination; and Nishida Kitarō’s notions of “place” (*basho*) and “inverse correspondence” (*gyakutaiō*). Abe conveyed his ideas through myriad lectures, conference papers, articles, and books. His most widely-read work, *Zen and Western Thought*, edited by William LaFleur, won an award in 1987 from the American Academy of Religion as the best recent “constructive and reflective” publication. Abe followed that influential volume with further collections of essays edited by Steven Heine: *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, and *Zen and the Modern World*. Abe also wrote widely in Japanese, with his most mature thought finding expression in several volumes he published later in life: *Kongen kara no shuppatsu* 根源からの出発 (Starting from the Root), *Kyogi to kyomu* 虚偽と虚無 (Falsehood and Nihilism), and *Hibutsu hima* 非仏非魔 (Neither Buddha nor Demon).

Abe also made significant contributions to the study of the renowned Sōtō Zen thinker Dōgen (1200–1253). With Norman Waddell he translated a

number of fascicles of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*), which appeared in *The Eastern Buddhist* and were then compiled as *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*. Abe published his own essays on Dōgen, again with Heine's editorial help, in *Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion*. In such journals as *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Abe also published essays on Nishida Kitarō and other Kyoto School of Philosophy thinkers, and, with me, he translated Nishida's seminal work, *Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究 (An Inquiry into the Good). Highlights of Abe's professional service include his many years on the editorial board of *The Eastern Buddhist* and a stint on the board of the International Association for the History of Religions.

Several days after Abe-sensei's death, in a telephone conversation with Abe Ikuko, his widow who for over twenty-five years, in devotion to Abe, accompanied and supported him on his frequent excursions abroad, I learned that Abe died peacefully, just as he had lived his life. As I talked with Ikuko, I looked repeatedly at a piece of Hisamatsu's calligraphy that Abe had given me long ago and now hangs above my desk. Written on that strip of paper is a Zen expression that seems to capture the depths I often sensed in Abe Masao:

Transcending the buddhas, going beyond the patriarchs,
Solitarily emancipated and attached to nothing.

Christopher Ives

