

## Buddhist Thought and Particularity: Thurman and Abe on a Nondualistic Middle Way

HENRY SIMONI-WASTILA

**B**UDDHIST traditions have developed diverse and sophisticated descriptions of the relationship of Nirvana (Skt. *nirvāṇa*) to samsara (Skt. *saṃsāra*). In order to limit the range of these possibilities, we will focus on the positions of two modern Buddhist writers: Robert Thurman and Masao Abe. In trying to interpret their views, we will, at times, translate the concern for the relation of Nirvana and samsara into Western terms, specifically, the relation of particularity to God. Our goal is not to assert the equivalency of God and Nirvana (or of particularity to samsara), but to focus on different ways of relating two discreet planes of reality. We should say “apparently” discreet planes of reality because, from the perspective of the Buddhist tradition, one should maintain a skeptical attitude to the assumption that phenomenally discreet entities are discreet in reality. Nevertheless, we will find interesting harmonies between how the relationship of Ultimate Reality to conventional reality is conceived and how the relationship of particularity to God operates in a pluralistic perspective.

*Particularity*, as we will use the term, refers, not to the ontological reification of a self, but to the unique experiential quality that constitutes each person (in each of that person’s experiences). Particularity is the perspectival uniqueness of conscious individuals who have subjective innerness. This subjective innerness is in flux. From moment to moment each human experience is a different particular experience. Thus, particularity is not a claim for a persistent, self-identical self or soul.

The postulation of *radical particularity* is a stronger claim than that which

states particular persons have a subjective side. Radical particularity means that the particularity we sense at a *prima facie* level is not merely a surface phenomenon, but is a particularity that maintains itself at a root level. The particularity of events remains in any deep description of reality, a reality which is ultimately pluralistic. In other words, radical particularity implies that there is no grand monistic unification of the world in which the unique perspective of individuals is subsumed or negated.

The *problem of radical particularity* asks how separate individuals with unique perspectives can form intimate relationships. If the core reality of a being is unique and unrepeatable, what does relationship mean? What does it mean for two realities to share if they do not have access to each other's heart of hearts? Is relationship merely a matter of peripheral interactions? Specifically, does compassion require an empathy in which there is a full co-feeling of the experience of the other? If living things are separate to the extent that they have unique subjectivities, is relationship merely an exchange at an external level, leaving the inner core directly unaffected? This difficulty in conceiving relationship is what is meant by the problem of radical particularity.

Furthermore, there is a special application of the problem of radical particularity for the philosophy of religion. How does the individual person relate to a Higher Reality within a metaphysics of particularity? If a unique point of view is only available to an individual as that individual, how could a Higher Reality include, know or have compassion for such a particular being? Is there a fundamental aloneness into which even the Ultimate cannot intrude? One might accept separation between the cores of human persons as a function of what must be the case in a world of several conscious beings; but is it as easy to conceive of God or Buddha as similarly separate? The goal of our present discussion is to explore what a Buddhist response might be to the "theological" problem of radical particularity (to use a Western formulation of the problematic). In doing so, we will ask how Buddhists might conceive of the relationship of conventional reality to Ultimate Reality within a metaphysics of radical particularity.

We should remain aware that the Buddhist tradition often seeks to avoid metaphysical issues for soteriological, or salvific, reasons. Perhaps the metaphysical minutiae which the problem of radical particularity addresses could be seen as a question outside the practical purview of Buddhist soteriology. Is it possible to transcend the types of questions we are asking in order to formulate a salvific religious perspective? Yet, to the extent Buddhists have addressed metaphysics, we may ask: Do Buddhist thinkers offer a way of

conceiving relationality that is cognizant of what we have called radical particularity? Using the positions of Thurman and Abe, we will conclude that the Buddhist tradition does, in fact, have important resources in dealing with the question of radical particularity.

*Inwardness and the Non-Self*

We are completely candid throughout the following discussions that we are asking a question which arises from a Western metaphysical perspective. Yet we ask in order to see what light the Buddhist tradition might shed. Does Buddhist thought possess analogous concepts to particularity? Does it somehow resolve the problem of radical particularity? Or does it deny the very perspective from which the question is asked as a matter not conducive to enlightenment?

Our questioning begins with a specific perspective on what it means to be an individual, a particular thing. To be an individual, especially an individual human being, means to be different and separate from other people. To be a person is to possess a sense of inwardness. Through introspection, we become aware that this subjective inwardness is not available to be fully appropriated by other people. We always exist as separate individuals to some extent. It is true that the experiences of other people are available to us both emotionally and objectively. And we may be empathetic and compassionate towards others. Yet, only our own experience has a sense of mine-ness. Our ownership of our particular experience appears unique. We know this phenomenologically—this is how our experience appears to us, or at least this is our hypothesis. My ownership of my experience is different than your ownership of yours. Because one person's identity is always partially disconnected from another person's, relationality becomes problematic. We never seem to be able to relate at a core level because other people's cores are simply not experientially available to us.

The presentation of particularity must be limited in scope here, but a further analysis of particularity and its implications for philosophy of religion are available elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Immediately, however, the particularity of the person needs to be distinguished from the Buddhist concept of the non-self (anātman). Particularity does not mean the self is an unchanging agent that is ontologically self-caused. Neither does particularity imply the complete exclusion of others. According to our theory, a particular person may be in

<sup>1</sup> Simoni-Wastila 1997a, 1997b; 1999.

flux, may be contingent, may be affected by others and may be set within a chain of causes. Particularity refers to the interiority of the person as an individual.

There is, perhaps, an internal problem of radical particularity in understanding personhood: How do the individual experiences a person has form a whole? In answering that question, it becomes evident that a non-reified self is a consequence of radical particularity. This is because each radically particular experience is separate from other radically particular experiences of the “same” person.

As we have already touched upon, there is a fundamental problem with the metaphysics of radical particularity. If, in fact, individuals are unique, it appears that their full individuality is not translatable by any sort of Ultimate Being or Non-being. What would it mean for a universal being to be contained within the limits of a particular being in order to know that particular being as it is? As noted, this is the theological problem of radical particularity. Just as it is difficult to conceive how relationship between particular humans beings is possible, it is difficult to know what relationship means between any sort of Ultimate Reality and persons.

The issue is even more pressing if one takes the religious relationship as meaning that Ultimate Reality has full access to the subjectivity of the person. Does compassion (Skt. *karuṇā*) require that one fully know or empathize with the particularity of each person? Regarding the Western notion of omniscience, we have shown elsewhere that is difficult to assert that God knows human inwardness in exactitude.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that God and Buddha-nature are comparable, there may also be difficulties in showing how Buddha could be compassionate, if compassion requires a completely inclusive empathy.

### *Dependent Co-arising and Own-Being*

So far, we have seen that particularity does not imply a reified self. A particular personality, as we have conceived it, is not an unchanging entity or soul. We can also immediately make reference to an aspect of Buddhist thought which stresses the interrelatedness of all things. All things are said to arise as a result of *pratītyasamutpāda*, dependent co-arising. This would seem to place each entity within a causally determined context. Because we have spoken of the separateness of entities, it is not clear whether radical particularity is set within a causal network in this way.

We will begin by interpreting *pratītyasamutpāda* in terms of physical

<sup>2</sup> Simoni-Wastila 1997a.

causality. To be a radically particular being does not mean that one is fully isolated from a context of others. If we take the example of a cake, we will see that the cake is composed of flour, water, sugar, etc.<sup>3</sup> There is no ingredient “cake” which is added. A cake is composed of elements that are already there; the cake, therefore, appears not to be a radically separate being. Likewise, people are not totally *de novo*. A human being may be seen as the aggregate of molecules which have played a causal role in the body’s development. Radical particularity does not deny this causal role.

However, the metaphysics that results from the implications of radical particularity denies that an analysis of components can describe the experience of the whole. The phenomenological aspect, the actual lived experience, of a person is different than any objective biological account, no matter how complete. And the fact that a particular person is within a field of others that help condition it does not deny that one’s experience is one’s own. One may have a unique perspective, even if it is in relation to others. The crux of the issue is that there is a difference between *the manner in which* a person exists in a context and the objective fact that a person exists in a context. Thus, to say that we live in a causal chain of dependent co-arising does not negate the individuality and uniqueness of each experience. The manner in which we exist includes privacy and subjective difference.

As a religious doctrine, however, the idea of dependent co-arising primarily means that the root of suffering relates to ignorance. The denial that the inwardness of each person is available to others is a separate claim. Thus, whether dependent co-arising is interpreted as physical causality or as a religious doctrine, it is not directed against what we are asserting concerning radical particularity.

A second important Buddhist concept that is immediately relevant to a discussion of particularity is the denial of *svabhāva*, the position that things do not have own-being. Our presentation of radical particularity seems to maintain that persons have a sense of personal ownership of their being—that only they have a sense of mineness regarding their experience. However, radical particularity does not mean that individuals are self-existent. The uniqueness of particular events does not mean that they somehow give themselves the power to exist. Thus, radical particularity does not mean things have own-being in the sense of being self-caused. As we noted, the fact that things exist in a context of causes does not mean they cannot be radically particular.

<sup>3</sup> Thandeka, in public lecture.

Furthermore, if we take the Buddhist claim against own-being as a claim that one cannot find out what an object is in isolation because of the co-implication of other things, this still does not make radical particularity impossible. Edward Conze describes this meaning of own-being: “A thing is never found by itself alone, but always together with others which ‘stand around it’, and constitute its ‘circumstances’. As soon as we try to find out where a thing ends and where its circumstances, or conditions, begin, we no longer know where we stand.”<sup>4</sup> It is true that causal links can be found between individual conscious beings and the world. However, the inability to give an account of one thing without referring to others does not mean there is no subjective separation. For example, the knowledge that one person is in the same gravitational field (along with knowledge of all further facts) as a second person does not give the second person access to the interiority of the first person. The ultimate evidence for radical particularity is an intuition into the phenomenological experience of what it means to be an individual. This introspective intuition does not rely upon pure isolation, but interiority.

It is only fair to admit that Conze’s further account of own-being does tend towards defining own-being in a similar manner to how we have defined radical particularity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Buddhist tradition might take the definition of radical particularity which we have offered as provisionally problematical. However, our goal here is not to fully present the theory of radical particularity; further articulation of its metaphysics is available elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, radical particularity does not mean that individuals are utterly isolated from reality, but that their inner subjective experience is special, unique and non-transferable. Radical particularity is not asserting a causal isolation in which a being is divorced from the world as a totally independent “me.” Rather, particularity is the phenomenological or experiential sense of otherness or mineness.

### *Robert Thurman’s Middle Position*

Having preliminarily differentiated radical particularity from some potential misinterpretations, we can enter a discussion with more developed Buddhist views. Robert Thurman notes a general philosophical problem in the conceptualizing of the relationship of the ultimate and the relative:

<sup>4</sup> Conze 1967, p.144.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp.239–240.

<sup>6</sup> Simoni-Wastila 1997a, 1997b, 1999.

Dualism in its extreme form radically separates the ultimate from the relative, arguing for an absolute lack of connection between the two, the absolute “transcendentality” of the ultimate. Examples of such dualism abound in Judea-Christo-Islamic traditions in the arguments of individuals who insist on the total “otherness” of God—His namelessness, unsymbolizability, transcendental, and incomprehensibility.<sup>7</sup>

Thurman notes that there have been a large number of schools who could be put in that dualistic camp as well as many others that could be put in the opposing monistic camp. Thurman is noting something similar to the problem of radical particularity in that the radical separation which dualism entails makes any sort of connection impossible.

Thurman also raises an issue concerning transcendence:

If God is totally transcendent, there can be no creation, no Word, no incarnation, etc. and no idea of “God” would have anything at all to do with it. The “transcendent ego” would belong to no one, the Tao would never get involved in the ten thousand things, and Nirvana could never be attained.<sup>8</sup>

As does dualism, a theory of full transcendence separates the Ultimate from any point of interaction with the world.

On the other hand, an equally strict monism which makes the difference merely illusory is also inadequate: “Similarly, an absolute monism dictates the utmost incredulity regarding bifurcated consciousness, so obviously illusory as not to warrant a second thought.”<sup>9</sup> We have noted that the problem of radical particularity also makes absolute monism impossible because individuals remain in their particular natures. As they are, individuals cannot be unified with the One. In strong versions of monism, the differences manifest to conscious beings are not so much explained as explained away.

We are still lacking a way to clarify what the relationship of a particular to the Ultimate might be. Thurman says, “Therefore, since by definition absolute dualism and absolute monism both preclude the possibility of any sort of experience of anything Real, it follows that all spiritual experience lies somewhere between sheer confrontation and total union, each one

<sup>7</sup> Thurman 1981, p.209.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

representing a unique combination of elements of both.”<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of radical particularity, a position between absolute monism and absolute dualism also seems required for a consistent metaphysics. After accepting particularity as a working hypothesis, one needs to show how relationality can be described between separate individuals without requiring an absolute unity. Relationship to the Real requires that radical particularity be available without being subsumed.

The thesis that Thurman defends is of a Buddhistic nondualism, which is somewhere between the two metaphysical extremes of monism and pluralism:

In Advaitavedānta, where the monistic totality of *nirguṇabrahman-paramātmān* is powerfully emphasized and the world is dismissed as mere illusion, there is a radical opposition to the notion of an alienated creature utterly removed from his Creator. On the other hand, in more qualified forms of Hinduism and in all forms of Buddhist nondualism, the degree of sameness between devotee and deity is always less than total, or else is a kind of completeness wherein some form of pluralistic individualism is preserved.<sup>11</sup>

According to Thurman, Buddhism has historically recognized the fundamental problematic of relating two realities, the absolute and the relative, in a way that sees both a problem with monism and with pluralism.

The Buddha, according to Thurman’s review of the traditional account of his teaching, was unconvinced by the monist option purveyed by the Upanishadic priests of his time. Vedic monism seemed “strongly escapist in its yearnings for union with the cosmic whole, the world soul called brahman by the individualistic philosophers recorded in the early Upaniṣads.”<sup>12</sup> Somewhere, a connection must be found between the poles of samsara and Nirvana without fully identifying them. In Thurman’s terms, “pluralistic individualism” must be maintained at some level.

A first Buddhist attempt at a solution seems to be dualistic. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths is based upon a two-tiered universe. One level includes suffering, and a higher level is beyond suffering. Nirvana, the burning out of the fuel of suffering, is dualistically opposed to samsara. As Thurman interprets:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.210.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.211.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.215.



The dualism taught here is truly one of the most extreme forms of that doctrine ever proposed. Nirvana is absolutely outside of the compounded world. It is uncreated, uncaused, deathless, and beyond all suffering, and yet ultimately ineffable, as no attribute can confidently be predicated of it.<sup>13</sup>

In this *via negativa*, all that can be said of Nirvana is that it is other than samsara. Thurman further explains that Nirvana is not identical with a wide variety of spiritual experiences including an experience of absolute nothingness.<sup>14</sup> This underscores its ineffability and its difference from samsara. Yet, some Buddhist thinkers make the move of reifying Nirvana:

Of course, this rigorous otherness of Nirvana did not prevent numerous adherents of early monastic Buddhism, members of the eighteen sects of the individual Vehicle, from reifying Nirvana into something like a formless state, idolatrizing it into a kind of superheaven into which they are going to escape, and the Buddha into an emissary of that superheaven, or leader of the rush away from samsaric misery.<sup>15</sup>

From Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamika* perspective, this and other types of reification are suspect and even naive. According to Thurman, Nāgārjuna argues against the "naïve reification of the immanence of the Body of Truth in all things, from the pure aggregates of a Buddha's Form Body down to every atom in the universe."<sup>16</sup> The Ultimate is, thus, not a separate thing nor is it the same thing as the universe.

At this point there is clearly a version of the problematic of how different things can be in relation: "In brief, if the Transcendent and the world were the same, intrinsically or really the same, what would be the use of the different names? And if they were intrinsically or really different, how could any positing of relationship between them be meaningful?"<sup>17</sup> This is a clear acknowledgment of a comparable concept to the problem of radical particularity. The conclusion is that the dualistic view contained in the Four Noble Truths is inadequate.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.217.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.218.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

At this point, Thurman offers a “transcendentalist” view of otherness or Nirvana in its relationship to the conventional level of reality. It is worth reading in full:

Absolute reality cannot be captured by any concept, neither by “emptiness” nor by “fullness.” No assertions therefore should be advanced dogmatically, as any such assertion would be idolatrous, vitiating the critical transcendentalism of the absolute. After all, any conceptualized idea is just as idolatrous as a golden calf, if it pretends to be adequate to a reality in principle beyond any human concept. Nevertheless, “empty” may be taught as a technique for developing the mind’s criticality of any attachment to sign, wishes, objects, or ideas. “Nonempty” may be taught to turn the mind away from quietist absorption in a reified absolute back into the dreamlike profuse richness of the world. “Both empty and nonempty” may be taught to stretch our conceptuality to cultivate a tolerance of plurality, multivocality, and complexity. And “neither empty nor nonempty” may be taught to inculcate the antidogmatic, non-authoritarian openness to the word-transcending vivid reality of life that is so aptly greeted by the famous “silence of the Saints.” These four teachings are not advanced as final solutions, yet are all part of the conceptual pharmacopoeia of remedies for the illness of clutching at life with constructs, and are used to free conventional reality as a space of living.<sup>18</sup>

This view shows considerable complexity in dealing with many important soteriological themes. The pragmatic use of concepts frees the mind for the tasks one faces in squaring off with the realities of life and enjoying the dream-like encounters possible in that same life. However, in part because of the “transcendentalism” of the Absolute, there is also no clear articulation of the relationship between the particular person to something that is other.

Nevertheless, the Buddhist position is not an anti-conceptualism in the sense of being a relativism. Thurman notes:

Words after all are meaningful, and reveal many aspects of reality, either ultimate or relative. It is only when they pretend to capture reality, to reduce it to their own construction, that they become

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.222.

traps, rather than the useful tools they are. So the Buddhist insistence on the ineffability of reality is not at all a “nonrational,” “paradoxical” approach hopelessly mysterious to us “rational” “westerners,” but rather a precise and rationally derived demarcation of the limits of words. The silence of the saints is not a mysteriously referential point beyond, but rather a judicious restraint in knowing where to stop, in knowing where others must see for themselves, where no authority will provide genuine understanding.<sup>19</sup>

Buddhism is not a position that asserts the meaninglessness of language and concepts. Although non-realist in its claim that language is limited, it still preserves a large area of linguistic validity. It is, therefore, not an extreme form of relativism. Rather, it recognizes the need to stop the process of rationalization at some point. In other words, enlightenment is an experience, not a theory.

The problem of radical particularity also has a similar linguistic implication. If, in fact, each cosmic event is unique, it is, by its very nature, incommunicable. Somehow relationship does occur, and language and symbolization may be a large part of the communication that occurs between particular people. But language is not capable of transferring the phenomenological experience of one person into the consciousness of another. That task is too large because language is an objective tool. That which language communicates is never the fullness of the two experiences of the two particular beings who are communicating, but only some limited aspect of their experience. Yet, to say that language has intrinsic limits is not to be committed to the position that discourse is inherently unreasonable.

In spite of a generally non-theistic, non-monistic philosophy that stresses otherness, does not Buddhism sometimes return to monistic spiritualism at specific times in its history? The human desire for full communication with the Ultimate finds expression in the vastly large and intimately close indwelling of Buddha(s):

*Amitāyus* is *both* utterly real as a cosmic Beatific Body in a heavenly Buddha-land that dwarfs universes by the billions, whence emanate endless streams of clouds of Buddhas to teach in innumerable solar systems in innumerable galaxies; a vision of massive

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.224

spiritual substance of an immensity that dwarfs and yet embraces this puny human realm; *and* He is also one's own mind. And the macro-micro interfusion is clearly evidenced in what is essentially a popular text (not that all its readers always paid all that much attention to it). This is truly a case of what Vimalakīrti calls the "mystery of the placing of Mount Sumeru in a mustard seed."<sup>20</sup>

To my mind, this reads similarly to "both-and" theologies which seek to preserve both God's transcendence and God's immanence. This is highly problematic from the perspective of radical particularity which stresses the uniqueness of the individual. Thurman's point here is merely to show that the Buddhist tradition is not monolithic but possesses diverse possibilities (some of which may be metaphysically problematic).

As in the case of Western mysticism, there is in Buddhism, especially in its Tantric form, an experience of consubstantiality and union, "known as a union of calm and insight, [it] is the experience of the Body of Truth, is beyond time, ineffable, the perfect bliss of universal peace."<sup>21</sup> But this is a union of and between separates, not a merging of otherness into same:

The symbol here is that of full sexual embrace, an intimate union of opposites, male and female, wisdom and compassion . . . , although note that this is integration of "nonduality" wherein the duality is preserved in blissful contact, and is not the mere opposite of duality, namely unity, where the poles have been lost entirely.<sup>22</sup>

The meditative and libidinous techniques used to engender this experience are focused not on oneness but contact. The Deity is "both external and internal," the "ninety million, billion, trillion" mile high Amitābha is within a mustard seed on the tip of the nose, yet not the nose.<sup>23</sup>

These images and practices can be described by a middle philosophy in which neither absolute monism nor pluralism is presented as the metaphysical truth:

[T]he basic Mahāyāna practitioner operates on the basis of the perception of his goal as extremely remote and "other" than himself,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.228.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.248.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.241.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.240.

although the awareness of the dynamism of the Buddhas' compassion serves to bridge the gulf between himself and Buddhahood, which gulf is of course radically unmitigated in the Hinayana total separation of Nirvana from samsara.<sup>24</sup>

The later Mahayana tradition may be thought of as stressing a middle position between the Ultimate as Wholly Other (the Theravadan undying and unconditioned Nirvana) and the Ultimate as identical with reality (Hindu Brahman as Ultimately what is real). In this middle way, particularity and relationality are both maintained in terms of maintaining what is empty and what is nonempty.

Any attempt at a rigorous articulation of the relationship of the Ultimate to the particular begins to cross the boundaries imposed by the limits of linguistic expression and conceptual apparatus. In spite of this recognition of the limits of language, I do not find a solution in suprarationalism that is fully acceptable. The suggestion appears to be that one should leave behind the ladder of rationality for the goal of the enlightenment. In principle, that may be an acceptable and admirable program. But I am not convinced that there is no more detailed way to articulate how relationship between the Ultimate and the particular is possible. And even if there is no conceptual way to clarify that relationship, we would need more argumentation before we assent to the incomprehensibility of that relation. Before we throw our hands up and meditate (which perhaps we should be doing in addition to thinking rationally anyway), one needs to be shown more clearly the need for such a drastic course of action, even if it is effective soteriologically. Other ways may be even more effective means of waking up.

Thurman makes clear that in the diversity of Buddhist world-views, there are a variety of resources in dealing with the relation of Ultimate Reality to samsaric experience. Theravadan dualism seems as inadequate as those Christian forms of dualism which assert the total otherness of Divinity (although these may also be salvific). On the other hand, placing Mt. Sumeru within the mustard seed seems not so much physically improbable as metaphysically impossible. Such an image symbolizes a monistic or both-and approach that is unacceptable from the perspective of radical particularity.

Thurman's location of the problematic offers the benefit of avoiding both metaphysically suspect poles. His acceptance of an element of "pluralistic

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.239.

individualism” is comparable to the pluralism that is a metaphysical complement of radical particularity.<sup>25</sup> His middle position articulates the reasons for such suspicion. Additionally, his view of a non-conceptual middle way tries to describe suprarationality not as escapist but as itself an, at least partially, rational decision. Although I am unclear whether such a suprarationalism is called for, I have no other solution for the problem of radical particularity at the level of rational metaphysics. So, perhaps, the solution will ultimately reside in some form of nuanced silence.

### *Masao Abe's Nondualism*

As is Thurman, Masao Abe is deeply aware of the problematic of the relation of the particular with the Ultimate. His interpretation of Buddhism allows for a nonduality that is promising, though at the same time extremely difficult. Abe explains:

In order to realize the true Reality, we must transcend every sort of duality, even the duality of absolute and relative, God and man, or non-discrimination and discrimination. Only in this way is the true Reality realized as such without assumption. This is not monism, which is still related to dualism, or pluralism, but rather, non-dualism, which is able to let duality or relativity really stand and work in its duality and relativity.<sup>26</sup>

Abe connects the relationship of absolute and relative with the concept of emptiness, as we will see. However, I will argue Abe's ultimate position sometimes skirts very close to what could be called a both-and metaphysics, the Ultimate is *both* in its own realm *and* thoroughly connected with the relative level of being. “This means that the *real* absolute, being liberated from the very distinction between the relative and the absolute, is *neither* the relative *nor* the absolute in their ordinary (relative) sense; yet *at the same time*, it is *both* the relative *and* the absolute in their ordinary (relative) sense.”<sup>27</sup>

Admittedly, Abe's position is difficult to make clear. It is hard to see how the “real absolute” could be liberated from the very distinction of the relative versus the absolute. Abe tries to explain more fully what is meant by the absolute being beyond the very distinction of absolute and relative: “This is

<sup>25</sup> On the pluralistic implications of radical particularity, see Simoni-Wastila 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Abe 1968, pp.43–44.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

why in Buddhism Nirvāṇa is not simply something beyond saṃsāra, but rather saṃsāra in itself which is realized as saṃsāra through the negation of ‘Nirvāṇa as something beyond saṃsāra’.”<sup>28</sup> It is difficult to sort out whether this is a blatant contradiction or an insight into subjectivity and particularity. There are at least three possible way of interpreting Abe’s position: 1) Does liberation consist in a denial that there is any duality in the first place? 2) Or is liberation the insight that the absolute fully encompasses both categories, both Nirvana and saṃsara? 3) Or does enlightenment consist in casting away conceptual apparatuses, such a dualistic models of reality, in order to experience what cannot be philosophically conceptualized or artistically represented? The last is the most likely.

The first way of interpreting Abe is that there can be no simple duality. As Thurman noted, the simple dualism of the Four Noble Truths and the stark separation of Nirvana and saṃsara in southern or Theravadan Buddhism is not adequate, at least from the Mahayana perspective, which Abe also shares. And yet, the difficulty is showing how, by some sort of spiritual insight, Nirvana is seen to be saṃsara in itself. What is the meaning of the familiar Mahayana refrain that “Nirvana is saṃsara”? Although there is no simple duality, there is at least a provisional duality in how saṃsara is apprehended or valued. Abe denies that this preliminary duality is ultimately real, but it is not clear what follows from that denial.

A second way of interpreting Abe is as asserting a “both-and” metaphysics. Both-and theories assert that Ultimate Reality is both transcendent and immanent. Abe relates his presentation of nonduality to *śhunyata* (Skt. śūnyatā), emptiness, the root of both wisdom and compassion. It is helpful to use Frederick Streng in elucidating the role of emptiness. Streng confirms that there is no duality between nonduality and duality: “The knowledge of ‘non-duality’ . . . is not a knowledge of ‘non-duality’ as distinct from ‘duality’, but a release from the attachment to such a distinction. It is a knowledge that is a non-dualistically-oriented analytical knowledge into the empty nature of things whether perceived, felt, or imagined.”<sup>29</sup> The perception of the empty nature of things, does not, however, lead to the assumption of some sort of Reality that, although beyond conceptualization, is the seat of “being.” Streng writes:

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Katz 1978, p.164.

Concepts and analytic mental activity are then to be discarded for a different and more perfect mode of knowledge: intuition. . . . However, the denial of the conventional constructions as expressive of self-existent reality does not require the affirmation of a self-existent reality in the ultimate reality (suchness). . . . One is not required to affirm an absolute independent reality in the formless aspect of existence just because it is negated in the formed aspect.<sup>30</sup>

Here, intuition goes beyond the type of analysis that depends on dualism. The suprarational insight allows an indirect approach to ultimate reality. The Buddhist thinker becomes aware that there is no own-being in samsara, but this does not condone the postulation of an absolute that is not equally empty.

Samsara's being Nirvana does not imply that there is a monistic whole. This is why Abe says duality must stand and really work (see the first citation of this section). Abe writes on emptiness: "Accordingly, *śūnyatā* is not a mere voidness but a living and creative Voidness in which boundless interdependence between everything can take place and function without eradicating the particularity of everything and without reducing everything to the one ultimate principle."<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to see how interdependence can occur while maintaining the "particularity" of everything. This seems to be the very nub of the problem of radical particularity.

Abe's position seeks to ground interdependence without the reduction of the All to the One. For example, Abe differentiates his position from that of Charles Hartshorne's all-inclusive absolute and relative God: "However, it is so not in a sense that, as Professor Hartshorne means, the relative includes the absolute, but in a sense that through the Realization of *śūnyatā* the relative in itself is the absolute."<sup>32</sup> Abe's position is not a monism, but a position obtained through special insight above the rational level of discourse in which there are formulations of theories. Thus, Abe is not really asserting a both-and metaphysics, although his assertion of a "boundless interdependence" tends towards monism.

A third option for interpreting Abe is to take him as boldly casting to the winds the ladder of rational discourse. From the side of *ratio*, this appears as

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Abe 1968, p.47.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.48.



a leap. This leap, whether a leap of faith or merely a leap towards intuition, has a clear religious involvement. Just sit. . . . Meditate and experience directly. . . .

However, are we ready to throw away the conceptual ladder just yet? We are faced with an enormously difficult question because of the problem of meta-rationality: What are the criteria for suprarationality? Yet, isn't that a rational question? Perhaps we should go as far as rationality takes us, until the very process of rationality unfolds itself. . . . But it is not clear what that means.

It is not clear how to judge whether or not dismissing rationality is an escapism from the difficult task of philosophizing, especially regarding the issue of particularity and interdependence. Is the situation truly suprarational or merely beyond our current state of analysis? This skepticism about intuitionism should always guard against too easily attempting to ascend beyond the ladder of rationality. Yet refusing to critically consider the possibility that at some point rational procedures produce diminishing returns seems dogmatic and is in that sense itself irrational.

In another context, Abe speaks about the identity of samsara and Nirvana: "Unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition in which the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, good and evil, life and death are clearly distinguished, Mahāyāna Buddhism emphasizes the identity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, Buddha and sentient beings, body and mind, life and death and so forth."<sup>33</sup> The identity of these various elements seems to be monistic, as Abe certainly notes. Yet it is difficult to know exactly why it is not ultimately monistic.

Abe offers a longer explanation:

[Buddhism] appears to be quite monistic from a surface perspective. It is true that as a religion rooted in the profound awakening of Gautama Buddha, Buddhism is based on the one absolute truth through which everything is united. The aim of Buddhist life is to awaken to that one absolute truth and live it. However, to call the Buddhist idea of the one absolute truth *monistic* is quite problematic. This is because the concept of monism arises by being distinguished and set apart from dualism (and pluralism) and it thus not a truly independent principle. Rather it is still dualistically related to dualism (and pluralism). Monism excludes dualism and pluralism and therefore stands in opposition to them. Since the term

<sup>33</sup> Abe 1980, p.97.

monism implies such connotations[,] the Buddhist idea of the one absolute truth, which is termed dependent co-origination, emptiness, *tathatā* or Buddha nature, can not be properly called monistic. It should be called *non dualistic* rather than monistic.<sup>34</sup>

In order to clarify what is meant by nondualism as opposed (or perhaps not opposed) to monism, Abe introduces a distinction between “monistic oneness” and “nondualistic oneness.” Abe describes the differences in terms of four points. We will discuss these four points in trying to make clear our third interpretation of Abe: that of suprarationalism. Suprarationalism is not a negation of rationalism; it is not an irrationalism. Suprarationalism means that rationalistic methods are seen as valid as far as they go. But in order to live a fully human life, rationality must be superseded. Suprarationalism makes of rationality a ladder whose last rung is a stepping stone to something higher.

The first point Abe considers is that “monistic oneness is still dualistically related to duality and plurality.”<sup>35</sup> This seems a reworking of the original definition of monism. Monism is, however, a different theory than dualism: in that sense it is dualistically related to dualism. But if monism asserts that all is composed of one type of substance or that the world is an all-inclusive, interconnected whole, this itself does not seem dualistically related to dualism. If monism holds, then there is no dualism to be the contrast to monism. Nevertheless, the perspective of radical particularity agrees with Abe’s statement that monistic oneness does not let duality really stand and do its work.

The second point is that monistic oneness is a goal that is reached, whereas nondualistic oneness “is the *ground* or *root-source* realized here and now.”<sup>36</sup> This is explained further: “When we overcome monistic oneness we come to a point which is neither one nor two nor many, but which is appropriately referred to as *śūnya*, or empty. This emptiness or *śūnyatā* is true oneness in the sense of being completely free from any form of duality.”<sup>37</sup> The realization of *śūnyatā* or emptiness adds something to monistic oneness that transforms it into nondualistic oneness.

This, again, seems a reworking of the point that nonduality is closely connected with the central Buddhist concept of emptiness. Nonduality is “prop-

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

erly referred to as” empty and this means “being completely free from any form of duality.”<sup>38</sup> There is an evident circularity here. Besides that, it is difficult to see how emptiness makes a difference between the two types of monism. What is meant by coming to a point that is “neither one nor two nor many”?<sup>39</sup> Is this a form of rejecting the whole enterprise of metaphysics as unsalutary for enlightenment? Yet, does that answer the question of monism or merely forestall it? Perhaps the mention of the root source is an experiential category, but this does not solve metaphysical issue.

Thirdly, *śūnyatā* is itself not to be conceived or objectified: “To reach and fully realize *śūnyatā*, it is necessary to overcome conceptualization and objectification completely.”<sup>40</sup> This point is consistent with Thurman’s view of the non-objectifiable silence of the saints. It would seem that Abe is offering an understanding of oneness that is of a fundamentally different level than a metaphysical analysis concerning what it means for one entity to be in relation with another. The attitude of the questioner is what is itself being called into question.

What the Buddhist answer is, then, appears to be not so much an “answer” but the suggestion that a different sort of wisdom, realization, or waking up is necessary: “The existential realization of *śūnyatā* is a turning point from the objective approach to the non-objective, existential approach, from monistic oneness to nondualistic oneness.”<sup>41</sup> Martin Heidegger’s term “existential” refers, generally, to a personal apprehension of a moment in its lived quality. It is not the conceptual analysis of that moment. By saying nondualistic monism is an existential monism, Abe means that nondualistic monism is not an objective account of the universe but a new way of approaching it. One gives up the attempt at a rational account for an insight gained in meditation. This third point confirms that neither *śūnyatā* nor nondualistic monism are merely conceptual constructions. They are conceptual constructions used as tools for a religious awakening. The approach is not intellectualistic but existential. Abe’s position is most clear in making this essential point.

However, if the experience of emptiness is nondualistic, why is it referred to as “nondualistic”? This may be a problem arising out of the limits of

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

language. “Nondualistic” is a conceptual term that is to bear the weight of showing that conceptualization needs to be transcended. Thus, Abe’s position is that nondualistic monism is a refusal to play the game of making distinctions or dualisms. In that way it sets its course not in distinction to other courses—that would be dualistic—but it sets out with a refusal to use the conceptual approach. There are no distinctions made; hence, it is nondualistic.

We might be tempted to think that Buddhist nondualistic monism is a dualism or a monism because our horizon of questioning arises out of dualistic thinking. Buddhist nondualism claims a different approach. Thus, our over-arching question concerning the metaphysics of particularity may originate in a manner of thinking which is itself problematic, according to Abe.

Abe offers a fourth point. He claims that non-Buddhistic monistic oneness is in opposition to the world: “Even though it can be all-inclusive[,] it is more or less separated from the particularity and multiplicity of actual entities in the world.”<sup>42</sup> Here, there is a recognition of “particularity” and separation. Abe uses Vedanta and Baruch Spinoza as examples of a type of flawed monism. Opposed to this is a more fully inclusive monism, “[N]ondualistic oneness which is based on the realization of *śūnyatā* includes all individual things, just as they are, without any modification. . . . There is no separation between nondualistic oneness and individual things. At that point the one and many are nondual.”<sup>43</sup> The language seems to offer an all-inclusive monism. Abe claims that this is a nonsubstantial absolute, but the attribution of all-inclusivity seems unalterably monistic.

However, if things are left “as they are,” they are left in their particularity. One could say that Buddhist nondualism means that one can approach and appreciate the individuality of all things non-conceptually. In this way, Buddhism leaves individual things “just as they are.” One never needs concepts to see or to enter into relationship with the other. Hence, one is in potential relationship with all things when one possesses the attitude of emptiness. The four points Abe raises confirm our third way of interpreting him, namely as a suprarationalist.

Religiously, to follow the Mahayana path, one does not escape into Nirvana, but sees the needs of others through compassion. One can live redemptively in the real world of particular beings, returning with open arms

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp.98–99.

into the marketplace. To be enlightened in this way is certainly a valid religious and ethical worldview. Abe writes beautifully of the wholesomeness and caring implicit in Buddhism:

This involves going beyond so-called *saṃsāra* to attain so-called *nirvāṇa* and, without abiding there, returning to so-called *saṃsāra*. To move freely back and forth between so-called *saṃsāra* and so-called *nirvāṇa* without attachment to either of them, this pure dynamic function of saving both oneself and others, is no less than true *nirvāṇa* in the *Mahāyāna* sense.<sup>44</sup>

These claims ground ethics in a non-escapism and a compassionate love for sentient beings. The return to the *Bodhisattva* ideal of saving others is aided by not substantializing *Nirvana* into an object separate from the realities of this world. The Buddhism which Abe describes, thus, offers a very healthy this-worldliness. Buddhism also offers us a healthy other-worldliness for greed, illusion and hatred are possible and must be transcended.

Abe's points help to explain the Buddhist position more fully, but many metaphysical difficulties remain. Abe's nondualism is a position carved out in awareness of the difficulties of relating *Nirvana* and *samsara*. This parallels the theological problem of radical particularity. Buddhist nondualism is, for Abe, a non-conceptual approach. Things abide in their particularity just as they are, and *Nirvana* is not a separate reality. Somehow, the fact that all things are empty allows this. Although I do not find a solution to the problem of radical particularity, Abe's position offers an insight into how one might approach the problem of how particularity could relate to Higher Reality, i.e. nondualistically. Although I cannot locate the point where rationality should be jettisoned in favor of intuition, there is, as of yet, no other solution to these issues.

### *Conclusion*

Our conclusion is that the problem of the relation of particularity to the universal has been noticed with acuteness in the Buddhist tradition. The silence of the Buddha, his reluctance to delve into metaphysics, is a noteworthy response to these types of metaphysical issues from a soteriological perspective. What is problematic about such a methodology is that, although these

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

metaphysical issues are difficult, there may be solutions which the approach by means of silence will not solve. Is there a higher conceptual level at which the antimony of the relationship of particularity and Higher Reality is resolved? That is an enormous question full of important repercussions for the philosophy of religion.

A suprarational intuition into emptiness lets some Buddhists claim that nonduality is the correct way of proceeding. The project of metaphysics can only reach so far. However, as we saw, the point at which the ladder of rationality must be abandoned is ambiguous. A more metaphysical resolution, which sometimes is attached to suprarationalism, is to assert a monism. Ultimate reality and conventional reality are really one and in full relation. Of the two writers we have discussed, Abe seems to lean closer to that form of monism.

Abe ultimately offers a suprarationalistic insight which lets duality (which we can take as particularity) stand and do its work. In our terms, there is no monism that negates radical particularity by subsuming it in the Ultimate. At the same time, Nirvana is not seen as dualistically separated from this world of samsaric particularity. The mistake of positing a completely separate Ultimate is avoided. Quite similarly, Thurman's position recognizes the need for a middle position which does not negate a realm of validity for "pluralistic individuality." Since there are strong temptations to settle this issue prematurely with either an aloof Ultimate or an inclusive one, Abe's and Thurman's positions maintain the correct balance between kataphatic and apophatic aspects, i.e. a balance between what we know and what we do not know.

Another option is to continue the metaphysical quest for an answer to the problem of radical particularity. This option would probably be located within a middle ground between absolute pluralism and absolute monism. This position would neither be dualistic (the extreme separation of Ultimate Reality and the world) or monistic (identity of God and world). But beyond staying in abeyance between these two problematical positions, we must live. A nondualistic middle way recognizes the issue which we have identified as the problem of radical particularity. Furthermore, it allows room for existential presentness, perhaps wisdom, and at least tranquillity.

## REFERENCES

- Abe, Masao. 1968. "Christianity and Buddhism Centering Around Science and Nihilism." *Japanese Religions*. Vol. 5: 3. pp. 36–62.
- . 1980. "Buddhism is not Monistic, but Nondualistic." *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*. Vol. 1: 2. pp. 97–100.
- Conze, Edward. 1967. *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Feenberg, Andrew and Yoko Arisaka. 1990. "Experiential Ontology: the Origins of the Nishida Philosophy in the Doctrine of Pure Experience." *International Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 30: 2.
- Hartshorne, Charles. 1964. "God is the Supreme Relativity." *Japanese Religions*. Vol. 4: 1. pp. 30–33.
- . 1969. "Duality Versus Dualism and Monism." *Japanese Religions*. Vol. 5: 4. pp. 51–63.
- Katz, Steven T. (Ed.). 1978. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Loy, David. 1988. *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Phillips, Stephen. 1987. "Nishitani's Buddhist Response to 'Nihilism'." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 55: 1. pp. 75–104.
- Simoni-Wastila, Henry. 1997a. "Omniscience and the Problem of Radical Particularity: Does God Know How to Ride a Bike?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 42. pp. 1–22.
- . 1997b. "Divine Passibility and the Problem of Radical Particularity: Does God Feel Your Pain?" *Religious Studies*. Vol. 33. pp. 327–347.
- . 1999. "Particularity and Pluralism: William James and The Metaphysical 'End' of God." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*. Vol. 20/1. pp. 31–65.
- . 2000. "Unio Mystica and Particularity: Can Individuals Merge with the One?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 68. pp. 857–878.
- Thurman, Robert. 1981. "Confrontation and Interior Realization in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Traditions," in *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions*. Ed. Peter L. Berger. Garden City: Anchor Books.