

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Abe Masao's Legacy

## Awakening to Reality through the Death of Ego and Providing Spiritual Ground for the Modern World

JEFF SHORE

### TO QUOTE:

If nihilism is now an overwhelming reality in the modern world, it would appear that only Buddhist thinking can purely reverse our nihilism, and reverse it by calling forth the totality of *Sānyatā*.

Such statements from Nishitani Keiji or other Kyoto School religious philosophers are nothing new. The above quotation, which calls into question in a most radical manner the very ground of the Western tradition, is noteworthy, however. For it comes from a Christian theologian. Thomas J. J. Altizer is an admittedly radical American theologian, but similar statements are repeated again and again by other theologians, thinkers, scholars, and religious figures in this book<sup>1</sup> as they attempt to come to grips with and describe the profound influence Abe Masao (b. 1915) has had on them.

There is much praise for Abe in the book, to be sure. But the contributors to this volume are not simply rehashing Abe, regurgitating his ideas and insights after being under his spell. The essays make compelling reading because the tone is not one of mere kowtowing; a Festschrift that simply heaps praise is of little interest to anyone except perhaps the authors and the subject. The

<sup>1</sup> This article reviews Donald Mitchell, ed., *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* (Boston, Tokyo: Tuttle, 1998).

contributors deal critically with crucial issues and come up with creative and original insights in the process. In short, under Abe's inspiration they are formulating a religious vision *beyond* present divisions and forging a *true world philosophy*. Before going into what I mean by this and what role Abe has played, let me briefly introduce the contents of the book.

Editor Donald W. Mitchell provides a preface which details the book's layout and summarizes Abe's activities. Altogether thirty-seven writers contribute to the book (including Huston Smith's foreword), which contains thirty-five chapters divided into six parts covering "From Japan to the West," "Periods of Dialogue in the West," "Theological Encounters," "The Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," "Comparative Philosophy," and "Interfaith Relations." Abe's contributions to Dōgen studies in the West, his introduction of Nishida philosophy and the Kyoto School, his position as D. T. Suzuki's successor, and his interpretations of figures such as Heidegger are described and evaluated. The essays are of fine caliber, though in a collection of this nature there is inevitably some repetition, and occasionally an essay suffers from near "Abe-idolatry" on the one hand, or too much factual reporting of things like conference agenda and details of searches for financial support on the other. A forty-page epilogue containing responses by Abe and a bibliography of his publications in English bring the work to over 450 pages. The only drawback is the index—very spotty and full of lacunae.

The essays in this volume provide overwhelming evidence of the great strides that have been made to deepen understanding of Buddhism and Zen in the West in the last twenty-five years, and Abe Masao has been at the forefront, often orchestrating, if not conducting. The back cover bills it as "a retrospective and an extraordinary step ahead in the encounter between Zen and the West." It also can serve as an accessible introduction for Zen enthusiasts and those otherwise intimidated by Abe's approach. Besides Altizer, quoted above, other leading theologians offering their reflections include John Cobb, Langdon Gilkey, John Hick, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Hans Waldenfels; eminent philosophers include Robert E. Carter, Ashok Gangadean, John E. Smith, and Joan Stambaugh; mature Buddhist scholars such as David Chappell and Ruben Habito, outstanding Jewish thinkers Eugene Borowitz and Richard Rubinstein, as well as other luminaries from various fields: William Theodore DeBary, William R. LaFleur, and Arvind Sharma. And the list goes on. The extent to which Abe Masao profoundly stimulated and challenged leading figures in so many arenas is simply astounding.

#### *God as Self-Emptying Love*

In religious dialogue and theological encounter, Abe's most significant contri-

## SHORE: ABE MASAO'S LEGACY

bution has been, taking his lead from Nishitani Keiji and Nishida Kitarō (especially in his last writings), his presentation of the nature of God's unconditional love as total kenosis (self-emptying). Whole books, including responses, rejoinders, and further rejoinders have been spawned from Abe's theological—and not just theological—challenge to realize God as essentially kenotic, to awaken to the ground of God as none other than *Śūnyatā*. Altizer, in his controversial essay here, which develops his response to Abe in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pleads for an understanding by fellow Christians of “a totally kenotic Incarnation” and “the crucified God”:

The simple truth is that Christian dogmatics, whether in East or West, has been unable to accept a totally kenotic Incarnation, unable to accept a crucifixion which is not simultaneously resurrection and glorification, and above all unable to accept or affirm the crucified God. True, this occurs in the early Luther and was a decisive source of the Reformation itself, but even as it was abandoned or disguised by the mature Luther, it virtually disappears in Protestant dogmatics and has never entered Catholic dogmatics, unless in a disguised form, as in Teilhard de Chardin. Thus, when Abe speaks of such an Incarnation, he inevitably shocks his Christian hearer, who has been conditioned by centuries of tradition to disguise or dilute the fullness of the Incarnation. Yet when hearing it from a seemingly alien voice, the Christian can sense the presence of a primal faith that has been lost by that very tradition.

To the book's credit, disagreements and criticisms are raised freely, and often. For example, Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., in his essay on Abe's dialogues with the German Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, clarifies Pannenberg's position that the kenosis of Christ does *not* lead to the notion of a kenotic God, for the New Testament makes no mention of kenosis by the Father and kenosis by the Son should be seen as *obedience to the Father*. Both Abe and Pannenberg agree, however, on a number of fundamental issues, including, in the words of Bracken, “that the nature or essence of God is self-giving love, or agape.” In his essay, editor Mitchell comments on this dialogue: “It was interesting to note that afterward many, if not most, of the Christians in the audience were more inclined to Abe's position than to Pannenberg's. It seems ironic that Christians would prefer a Buddhist's view of their God over a fellow Christian's.”

Stephen Morris, in the stunning and eloquent final essay of the book, brings this debate back down to earth by reminding the reader of the fundamental discontinuity between new person and old in the Pauline faith:

Abe builds on Saint Paul, the crux of whose message was equally radical, in presenting his understanding of the *fully* "Emptying God," which is not an event of the past or a hope for the future but a fact of the present.

Bracken, again quoting Pannenberg, had already reminded the reader that it was Luther who realized "that in the event of regeneration according to Paul, not only some quality of the subject but the subject itself is changed."

Leaving aside the immensely complex and intricate theological implications of all of this, I think Abe's real contribution here is his willingness to patiently return with us again and again—and from wherever we may wish to begin—to the stark fact that spiritual death is an essential requirement for religious life. Spiritual death—self-emptying—is not, of course, simply, or primarily, a theological issue. Philosopher Stephen Rowe, towards the end of his essay, refers to this in reference to Paul in Galatians 2:20 (which, it should be remembered, begins with "I have been crucified with Christ" not "Christ has been crucified for me"). Abe has brought this obvious point of the need for spiritual death, the death of the ego-self, back to the center of religious dialogue, where it belongs. And the essays in this book make it abundantly clear that he has done it with his probing presence as much as with his incisive thought. Many, from colleague to student to the general public, have been challenged and inspired in a most fundamental and existential manner by Abe, whether in person or at least on paper.

#### *Śūnyatā as Emptiness Emptying Itself*

As indicated above, Abe's major contribution to deepening *religious* understanding is his presentation of the kenotic God and its affinity with *Śūnyatā*. The major *philosophical* contribution he has made is his analysis of Western metaphysics and its comparison and contrast with dynamic *Śūnyatā*, which, in emptying itself, is none other than Wondrous Being. Needless to say, Abe is at bottom expressing one and the same thing in these two fields. Richard DeMartino, in his essay, traces the first suggestions of this presentation of *Śūnyatā* in English back almost a century to D. T. Suzuki's early works.

Eugene Borowitz writes of being overwhelmed by the extraordinary significance of Abe's "Non-Being and *Mu*: The Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and the West." I clearly remember at university reading Abe's groundbreaking article "Zen and Western Thought" a few years after it was published in 1970 in the *International Philosophical Quarterly*. It blew my socks off. The audacity of this man to try and reduce the rich metaphysical tradition of the West to Aristotelian Being and Kantian Ought, then show how *Śūnyatā* goes beyond it all— and in a mere forty pages! Yet for the life of me,

## SHORE: ABE MASAO'S LEGACY

I could not refute his basic stance or argument. There I was going at a snail's pace—perhaps one step forward two steps back is more precise—trying to grasp the religious significance of negation for myself. Then I come across this article where Abe neatly and succinctly wraps up the whole kit and kaboodle, ties a *Sūnyatā* ribbon around it and lays it at my feet. At the time I hardly knew whether I wanted to hug the little fellow or throw him out of the window!

In an otherwise excellent piece, Robert Carter, trying to think it through and formulate it himself, states (emphasis added): "*We* must empty Emptiness itself and keep everything nonsubstantial and in the flow of movement in being-time." An unfortunate slip, especially when later on in the same paragraph he quotes Abe (again, emphasis added): "In order to attain true Emptiness, *Emptiness* must 'empty' itself." Big difference—heaven and earth have just changed places. And it goes back to the fact that Abe is expressing philosophically here the same thing that he expresses religiously elsewhere: thorough spiritual death, the death of the ego-self, is paramount for the true and full realization of Emptiness. Carter is experimenting with paradoxical language in his essay, but that's no excuse for sloppiness. Sometimes little things mean a lot.

Abe's more purely philosophical efforts, like his more theological ones mentioned above, are warmly applauded and deeply appreciated in this book, although here too he faces sustained criticisms and calls for more clarity and consistency. Despite his sharp, often penetrating, critical insight into other religio-philosophical traditions, a number of the contributors, including Harold Oliver and Thomas Dean, feel compelled to ask whether Abe has, with equal thoroughness, questioned and critically examined presuppositions of his own standpoint. Dean, for example, asks Abe where he stands and what are his criteria when he makes normative claims about Christianity, and about Buddhist or Zen superiority. Abe has attempted to provide a more nuanced and balanced analysis over the years, although clearly much work remains to be done. For Dean, however, "There is no universal or eternal standpoint, common or neutral to both [Christianity and Buddhism]." Claims of a "positionless position" or a "perspectiveless perspective" are simply untenable. I will return to these and other crucial issues below.

Joel R. Smith, pointing out inconsistencies in Abe's usage of terms, argues that Abe's predilection for negation can no more solve the problem of the antinomy between the negative and the positive than can the West's predilection for being. Hans Waldenfels sees Abe's standpoint as "firm and inflexible." John Hick, questioning Abe's acceptance of religious plurality, wonders about Abe's tendency to "want to identify one particular manifestation of the ultimately Real—that which is known through his own tradition—exclusively

with the Real in itself.” The Christian tradition, long criticized for precisely the same exclusivism, has turned the tables. Oliver, explicating Fritz Buri’s assessment of Abe, argues that Abe—and his teacher Hisamatsu Shin’ichi—tend to reduce Buddhism to Zen and to consider Zen as the most authentic form of Buddhism. This criticism can be made against D. T. Suzuki’s presentation of Zen as well.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is one of the more unfortunate and insufficiently examined aspects of the Suzuki-Hisamatsu heritage for Abe.

One of the most straightforward and penetrating attempts to discover *Śūnyatā* (as “Holy Nothingness”) in their own traditions is made not by a Christian but a Jew: Richard Rubenstein, who also questions Abe’s sense of responsibility for the Holocaust. Christopher Ives sees Abe’s Buddhism as an abstract composite created in part for the dialogue, and Abe’s Zen as ahistorical and idealized. Ives remarks, “As a corrective to this generally ahistorical nature of our dialogue, perhaps we could benefit from a conference on German Christians and Japanese Buddhists in the 1930s.” Ruben Habito, sparing in place of Hans Küng, continues pressing the question “Can Emptiness ground a commitment to a global ethic?” and comes away with a rather negative answer. In a similar vein, Hans Waldenfels asks, “How can a nondualism beyond good and evil strengthen human responsibility?” John Cobb and others have been raising similar ethical and social concerns in dialogue with Abe for many years. We will return to these issues below.

Waldenfels also felt that more Asians should have been invited to join in Abe’s discussions, while Arvind Sharma from India, in a different context and in support of Abe, quips: “We often hear of the East meeting the West. It was about time the East started meeting the East.”

### *Decisive Influences on Abe*

A formative influence on Abe that is just coming to the fore is his earlier Pure Land faith. Donald Mitchell, James Fredericks, and others mention this crucial aspect of Abe’s spiritual development; Steven Heine compares Abe’s explications of Dōgen with Shinran. Unfortunately, the profound influence of Pure Land thinker Soga Ryōjin (1875–1971) on Abe’s development is not mentioned in the book.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Editor’s note:* For an instance of D. T. Suzuki’s comment, see his essay, “Basic Thoughts Underlying Eastern Ethical and Social Practice,” originally published in Charles A. Moore, *Philosophy and Culture East and West* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1962) and reprinted in this number of the *Eastern Buddhist*.

<sup>3</sup> For an autobiographical essay touching on this aspect, see Abe Masao, “The Subtle Workings of the Issuing of the Vow,” translated by W. S. Yokoyama in the 1999 *FAS Society Journal*.

## SHORE: ABE MASAO'S LEGACY

The overwhelming influence of Zen Buddhism on Abe is common knowledge. Christopher Ives, in his introduction to *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, mentioned the decisive role of Hisamatsu and the FAS Society in Abe's spiritual development. *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* helps to fill in the details. Abe's prolonged and intense religious struggle culminating in his awakening under Hisamatsu at an FAS retreat is described. (Although Abe dedicated his book *Zen and Western Thought* to "Shin'ichi Hisamatsu Sensei" the only other mention of Hisamatsu by Abe in that book is once at the end of his introduction where Abe expresses his debt to his three teachers: Suzuki, Hisamatsu, and Nishitani, and twice in quote citations in the notes. The FAS Society is not mentioned. Revealing for their absence.) In *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* Felix Prieto offers a brilliant portrait of Abe's life as an illustration of the FAS acronym. A number of other contributors indicate the crucial role of Hisamatsu and the FAS Society for Abe, and Abe himself summarizes the activities of the society towards the end of his epilogue.

Abe's genius in dialogue has earned him the title "Mr. Dialogue" (David Chappell). Stephen Rowe describes dialogue for Abe as a form of religious practice. Never intended as mere "talks" or "discussions" but as what John Cobb and others refer to as *mutually transformative* dialogues, they owe much to the FAS Society practice of mutual inquiry, inspired by Hisamatsu but with roots back at least to the spontaneous mondō-exchanges of the T'ang dynasty.

Many contributors recount their personal experiences and lasting impressions of FAS Society practice-meetings in Kyoto.<sup>4</sup> Langdon Gilkey, recalling his visit to the FAS Society in Kyoto a few decades ago, writes, "I have often wondered how it has fared since the late seventies . . . ." Weekly meetings and occasional retreats are now held on a smaller scale at Rinkō-in, a temple on the grounds of Shōkokuji in Kyoto. For the past five years FAS retreats and lectures have been held annually in Holland and Belgium. There is strong interest in the FAS Society in Europe and the retreats are well attended. Interest in North America is also reaching critical mass.<sup>5</sup>

As editor Mitchell describes in the preface, Abe first visited the United States from 1955 to 1957 on a research fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation. He has returned to the States and Europe repeatedly in the last forty

<sup>4</sup> Slight correction: William LaFleur confuses Reiun-in, where the meetings had been held for years, with Shunkō-in, the temple that Hisamatsu lived in just to the north. Both temples are on the grounds of Myōshinji.

<sup>5</sup> For information on FAS Society activities worldwide, see *FAS Society Journal* or their homepage: <<http://web.kyoto-inet.or.jp/people/fas-soc/>>.

years to take up teaching positions at leading universities, give public lectures, initiate dialogues, attend conferences and other activities. (Before his teacher Hisamatsu died in 1980, Abe decided to dedicate the rest of his life to presenting Zen to the West.) The influence and effects of this have not, of course, been a one-way street; Abe himself has profited enormously from these precious opportunities, as is clear from the five books he has already authored or edited in English (with a number of others in the works), plus the slew of journal articles, book chapters, and translations. (The contrast with his output in his native language is telling—one book to date: *Kongen kara no shupatsu* 根源からの出発 [Issuing from the source], Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1996; a compilation of lectures given for FAS Society meetings.) Now in his eighty-fourth year, Abe has slowed down considerably, although he is still at work on a number of projects. Within two days of this writing Abe will lecture in my course on Zen Buddhism at Hanazono University for an American university program here in Kyoto.

*Abe Masao's Legacy: Awakening to Reality Through the Death of the Ego and Providing Spiritual Ground for the Modern World*

Abe's sustained activities and especially his vigorous encounters and dialogues have done much to transform the religious world stage itself. The focus has naturally been Buddhist-Christian, although recently Jewish thinkers have joined in and made valuable contributions. Through the issues Abe has raised and formulated, however, the stage is already set and open for dialogue with other religions.

One of Abe's oft-stated goals is to help world religions work together to create an effective response against the threat of contemporary anti-religious forces. But this goal, noble as it is, tends to betray his deeper intention which he inherited from his teacher Hisamatsu: to awaken the contemporary world to the fundamental problematic of the human condition—and the ultimate, inescapable demand to have it resolved through the death of the ego-self—not merely as a *specific religious dogma* but as a *universal human need*. To lose sight of this is not only to miss the crux of Abe but to ignore the compassionate hand that he has offered to the many not at home in *any* religious tradition. Abe is to be heartily congratulated for helping Christian theologians better understand the depth of their own traditions; he is to be venerated for helping lost souls, without any living religious tradition yet painfully aware of this ultimate and ineluctable human need, find a true path right under their own feet. History may well reveal Abe's role here as even more significant than his groundbreaking one within the confines of Buddhist-Christian-Jewish dialogue.



## SHORE: ABE MASAO'S LEGACY

There is a reason for this apparently rash prediction, and it suggests some tentative responses or answers to the criticisms raised in the book and mentioned above. Abe introduced Mahayana Buddhist thought and Zen, and critically compared them to Western religio-philosophical traditions with a rare combination of sophistication, depth, precision, and eloquence. His final task, though, as hinted above, is to open up a cosmological standpoint *beyond* such rubrics as "Buddhist" or "Christian," "atheist" or "nihilist." Thus Abe speaks not only of satori in Zen and salvation in Christianity, but, in a universal and nonsectarian voice, of "awakening to Reality through the death of the ego." At the end of the last essay, Stephen Morris reveals this as "Abe's own vision of supplying a spiritual ground for the modern world."

Unfortunately, Abe's responses to the contributors in the form of an epilogue is not the strongest point of the book. Some helpful clarifications are made, but much of the epilogue is, frankly, repetitious. The essays that form the body of the book actually overshadow Abe's epilogue. Perhaps this is further proof of the greatness of Abe as a teacher: his "students" have succeeded him. Renowned Ch'an master Po-chang Huai-hai is said to have told his disciple Huang-po Hsi-yün (the teacher of Lin-chi [Jp.: Rinzai]): "Insight equaling the master's diminishes the master's virtue by half; only insight surpassing the master's is worthy of receiving the transmission."

### *Taking the Next Step*

Now it is time to return to the criticisms mentioned above: Dean argued that "there is no universal or eternal standpoint, common or neutral to both [Christianity and Buddhism]." Dean and others question whether Abe's "positionless position" or "perspectiveless perspective" above the fray is tenable, or even possible. Where, after all, is Abe really standing when he makes normative judgments? Further, "Can Emptiness ground a commitment to a global ethic?" "How can a nondualism beyond good and evil strengthen human responsibility?" Abe has faced such criticisms and questions before, and he has responded to them. The fact that they surface again in this book indicates that the problems have not yet been resolved, at least to the satisfaction of all.

While Stephen Rowe's insightful article is also strongly recommended here, let me return once again to Stephen Morris' final essay to provide an opening (underline added):

[I]t would be a grave error, and a costly one, to view engaging with Abe as an encounter with a different religion, or as a collision in thinking between East and West. Such a casual appraisal would be a surefire way of missing the true significance of his work and skipping over his challenge; for although time and place are weighty circum-

stances that can exert a seemingly inescapable influence, Abe's stance is not confined by such limitations or cognizant of any boundaries. What he ultimately represents is far more basic, far more profound, and far more unnerving. The magnetism of his position draws us back to ourselves, terribly far inside, whence his call issues. *Genuinely to confront Abe, then, is to face oneself*; it is not to glance outward, as at some novel set of ideas, but to peer directly into the fathomless depths of one's own being alone, where the absence of a horizon strips one of any beliefs at all.

What could Morris possibly mean by Abe's stance not being confined by any boundaries? Abe is an avowed representative of the Mahayana-Zen tradition. Yet Abe himself also urges his listeners and readers to accept him as someone who has transcended the sectarian confines of any particular tradition. This is the source of much confusion for many, precisely because for Abe the two in no way conflict. Self-emptying is of course crucial here, too, but not as an idea or concept; rather, the actual self-emptying of the subject himself is required. Still, the critics might respond, *that is from the standpoint of Buddhism*, its doctrines of no-self, *Śūnyatā* and so on. As far as Buddhist doctrine is concerned, that is undeniable. But the deeper truth that Abe is ineluctably driving us toward—and speaking from—is quite the opposite, as Morris suggests. The living and dynamic religious fact requires a complete about-face: Self-emptying is not based on the standpoint of Buddhism and its doctrines; rather, the very standpoint of Buddhism and its doctrines are based on the actual fact of self-emptying itself. Again, the difference is as great as heaven and earth. (This, if you like, can be called "Zen Buddhism," although it is time that we started using that label more carefully and precisely, as a number of the contributors suggest.)

The real possibility—if not proof—is provided time and again by the Christians, Jews, and others in the book who, *while not relinquishing their own traditions*, wholeheartedly accept and stand with Abe on this most fundamental "standpoint." Is there "no universal or eternal standpoint"? Perhaps that finally and truly depends on *where one stands*. At any rate, the present world situation demands that we seek it with might and main.

Dean and other critics are right, though: This should not blind us to remnants of "superiority" or other problems, weaknesses, or vagueness in Abe's approach. In principle his standpoint may be a "perspectiveless perspective," a "positionless position," but that does not necessarily follow for every aspect of his thought or for all the concrete details. *Nor does it require us to stand in the selfsame place*. On the contrary, each of us must come to it on our own.

Open and frank criticism, especially self-criticism, is vital here; indeed, it

## SHORE: ABE MASAO'S LEGACY

should naturally arise from self-emptiness actually emptying itself. Recent studies, however, have shown time and again how poorly Buddhist and Zen history has borne this out. (See, for example: *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, 1995; *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, 1997; *Zen at War*, 1997.) Abe has yet to respond in any systematic or detailed manner to these recent critiques; it is unlikely that he will do that now. It is beyond the scope of this article as well, but another valuable lesson for each of us to learn from Abe is, in continuing this work on our own and in mutually transformative dialogue, to frankly and honestly wrestle with these and other remaining problem-questions. And come up with answers.

“Can Emptiness ground a commitment to a global ethic?” “How can a non-dualism beyond good and evil strengthen human responsibility?” These most pertinent social and ethical problem-questions must be responded to. If subjectivity is deepened until finally the bottom is actually broken through in spiritual death, a bottomless subjectivity is awakened that is utterly *objective* (i.e., selfless). One’s “standpoint” is then that of codependent arising-ceasing (*pratītya-samutpāda*), a standpoint of ALL. The WHOLE is encompassed in selfless self-identity—even as it awakens within and as each individual subject. (An abstract selflessness—or *Śūnyatā*—is, indeed, nothing at all.)

This does not, should not, prevent or impede socio-ethical action—just deluded, self-centered action. But neither will this “universal standpoint” result in *uniform* action by others, even though they may be equally selfless. The principle can be explained to some extent, but the actual working out in a particular situation cannot be foreseen or universalized: No, all enlightened people will *not* respond to the same wrong or evil in the same way.

For example, with the issue of whaling, this subjectless subject or selfless self stands as, or rather, it *is* the WHOLE, undivided—no more divided from the whale than from the whaler. To put it bluntly, the undivided whole is now the subject, and the subject is now the undivided whole. Again, this does not *prevent* action, but neither does it assume that the act will always be, for example, on the side of the whale. Action is truly concrete, yet issues from the *actual suffering*. It can, it must, deal with particular issues, but that issue must be grasped in its totality as the undivided whole (*pratītya-samutpāda*) that it really is.

Again, what prompts or demands action here is the actual, felt suffering—but not for or against one particular side or aspect. A Buddhist social ethic, if we call it such, starts from here, from the actual cries and suffering of the world. The great layman Vimalakīrti responded to inquiries about his “illness” by stating the ego-shattering teaching that because all living beings are subject to illness, he is ill as well. Action also starts from here, from the suffer-

ing of the world *which one is*, not any one-sided sentimentalism, no matter how seemingly noble or politically correct. This, incidentally, is also one way of explaining Abe's insistence on his karmic responsibility for the Holocaust, something which Richard Rubinstein finds meaningless.

It is a mistake to assume that such a standpoint—truly and thoroughly self-emptying—must ignore, reduce, or relativize social ills and injustices. Quite the opposite; such ills are now grasped directly from within as one's own. The fact that the response is often not the one that the critic hopes for should not blind the critic to the possible validity or merits of that response.

In light of what has just been said: "Can Emptiness ground a commitment to a global ethic?" Yes. How? By responding creatively to the suffering, from out of the suffering, in a truly *global*, selfless commitment to all. "How can a nondualism beyond good and evil strengthen human responsibility?" With dualistic attachment based on false self-attachment cut off at its root, *DYNAMIC NONDUALITY* works ceaselessly at the heart of the socio-ethical world for the true Good of all, not for any one-sided good. A so-called nondualism that merely transcends the ethical dilemma is no more than a concealed, higher-order dualism.

Having said this, I immediately and without qualification or contradiction add: The recent studies (*Zen at War*, etc., mentioned above) that detail questionable, if not plain rotten, track records for the Zen sect and even Abe's Kyoto School predecessors in responding to socio-ethical issues must not be ignored or simply explained away. They contain valuable critiques that must be thoroughly and carefully examined, and responded to, not just to clarify the past but for the present, and the future. The remark of my dear friend and esteemed colleague Fukushima Keidō, head abbot of Tōfukuji, that *Zen at War* is a "bad book"—and this without having read it—suggests how little we can expect from the Japanese Zen institution on such matters, and, by contrast, how precious is Abe's openness and willingness.

### *In Conclusion*

As we continue down the road that Abe has compassionately paved we will surely stumble upon other potholes, problems and limitations. I am certain that as we get to the end of the road, however, we will find ourselves in profound agreement over the fundamentals, even as we find ourselves coming from apparently opposing directions. This too, Abe has foreseen, and helped to plan out with meticulous care.

A good twenty-five years ago I was struggling blindly without guidance or support. Then I had the great good fortune to meet Richard DeMartino, a colleague of Abe and a fellow disciple of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and D. T. Suzuki.

## SHORE: ABE MASAO'S LEGACY

It is deeply satisfying to learn from this book that, unlike a generation or two ago when such teachers were rare indeed, people today have a number of capable teachers and guides who can share their distress and confusion. Through such encounters, some may be opened to the depth of their own religious traditions; others may turn to Buddhist practices, or struggle on their own and find their way through. Either way, imbued will be the lingering fragrance of Abe Masao. With this in mind I have dared to write the above, in spite of my reservations when this article was solicited, since my own brief and unoriginal spiritual biography of Abe is included in the book.

The word "feast" was used a number of times in the essays to describe what Abe offered in conferences and courses. *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* is also a rich feast with many courses and cuisines offered in return, not only for Abe to savor and relish, but for everyone. Morris ends the final essay with a plea for a kind of spiritual education transcending religions and religious sectarianism—a valuable idea that requires much clarification. But the gist is so deeply appreciated by Abe that he ends his epilogue, and the book, quoting Morris:

[W]hat is advanced here is all in keeping with Abe's own vision of supplying a spiritual ground for the modern world; his very participation in the philosophical religious process is an attempt to push the highest good within reach of the greatest number of people. *Everyone* deserves to be provided the wherewithal to retrieve the pearl.