

# Masao Abe on Zen and Western Thought

## PART TWO: FIRST ORDER ISSUES

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IN PART ONE of this essay we looked at certain second-order issues in Abe's approach to Zen and Western thought, namely, his understanding of the nature, goal and resources available for cross-cultural encounter in philosophy. We shall now look at the first-order language and concepts Abe uses in formulating his Zen philosophy and critique of Western thought. We shall look in particular at the implications of his use of traditional Western metaphysical terminology to clarify his Zen philosophy, and his subsequent use of that Zen philosophy to critique the very tradition from which he derives his terms. Our question will be: Does Abe's procedure open him to a philosophical rejoinder from recent developments in Western thought, especially Heidegger?

We will look first at the metaphysics presupposed in Abe's version of Zen thought. Is Abe's "Zen" critique of Western thought itself traditionally Western-metaphysical in nature? (V)

We will then examine what the critique of traditional Western metaphysics by newer movements in Western philosophy means for Abe's project. Does it call into question Abe's Zen philosophy insofar as it depends on a Western conceptual tradition that is itself under attack? Does it call into question Abe's critique of Western thought itself? (VI)

Next we will consider whether contemporary Western thought contains more resources than Abe's critique suggests. If so, can it contribute to rethinking problems in Abe's Zen philosophy that arise in the course of his dialogue with Western thought? (VII)

We shall conclude with a look at a different but equally important aspect of the dialogue between Zen and Western thought—the religio-experiential as distinct from the philosophico-ontological dimension of this cross-cultural encounter. (VIII)

## V

My initial claim is that the Western thought which is the object of Abe's critique and in part the source of concepts he uses in his Zen critique is restricted to what Heidegger calls the "onto-theo-logical" tradition of Western thought. He has a traditional-metaphysical view of (A) epistemological and anthropological phenomena (subject-object consciousness, the self), and (B) ontological terms (being, time, truth, reality).

## A.

Abe's understanding and critique of Western thought is cast in epistemological and anthropological terms deeply rooted in a traditional Western onto-theo-logical framework. We shall look at Abe's understanding of (1) the subject-object structure of consciousness, and the corollary concept of the self; (2) the objectifying nature of concepts, thought, and language; and (3) the possibility of access to reality as it is in itself, to things as they really are.

## 1. Subject-Object, the I, the Self

(i) In the ambiguous phenomenon of self-consciousness there are, according to Abe, two 'I's'. There is the 'I' which is the object of self-awareness and which, in moments of self-conscious reflection, is distinguished from all other 'I's' (as 'others') and indeed from all other 'objects' which are not this 'subject'. Abe calls this 'I', which is the 'object' of self-consciousness, the *ego self*. There is also the 'I' which is the active subject of the act of self-consciousness, and which can never be reduced to the object of an act of self-consciousness. In the moment that, as the subject of an act of self-consciousness at  $t_1$ , it is made the object of a new act of self-conscious reflection at  $t_2$ , it will, as the subject of that new act at  $t_2$ , already have eluded its own grasp. Abe calls this 'I', which is the ever-receding, ungraspable subject of self-consciousness, the *true self*. It is the actually *existing* self, as distinct from the *epistemological* self-as-object of the subject-object distinction (6; 276 n.2). This gap between the ego self and the true self is not accidental but inherent to the subject-object structure of conscious-

ness (6). In this subject-object structure of human self-consciousness, we not only look at all other entities, whether persons or things, "objectively", that is, "from the outside, not from within"; we even look at ourselves "from the outside". The self-as-object, the ego-self, is not a 'self' or 'subject' in the primordial metaphysical sense (5; 223).

(ii) The true self, the 'I' or self as "the genuine Subject", "must always stand 'behind', ever eluding our grasp" (6). As already noted, any attempt to grasp the true, existing self in an act of epistemic objectification leads to an endless, infinite regression (8). From the standpoint of the subject-object structure of consciousness, we seem compelled to accept the fundamental "*unattainability* of the true Self" (8). But, says Abe, this subject-object structure of consciousness is the epistemological foundation and presupposition of the entire Western metaphysical tradition. From the Zen perspective, therefore, it would appear that the Western tradition is confronted by a *koan* that it is unable to solve: the self is not-self, to which the Zen answer is: the not-self as self!

(iii) The Zen resolution of this Western impasse requires an overcoming of the subject-object structure of self-consciousness and its replacement by a transformed and direct realization of the true Self. The collapse of the effort to identify the ego self with one's true self is the first step in this process (7; 226). In the second step, even the distinction between self-as-subject and self-as-object, "between 'seer' and 'the seen', the realm of 'I' and the realm of 'Reality' ", is overcome (12).

(iv) Abe characterizes this second step as the "movement from the realization (A) *that the true self is unattainable*, to the realization (B) *that the unattainable itself is the true self*" (11). He speaks of an "immediate realization" of this 'unattainable' self (196). By 'immediate' or 'direct' he means that this realization is not an 'objectified' or 'objectifying' awareness of a 'something' which is thereby 'objectified'. The true self is 'unobjectifiable' (ibid.). How can we have an immediate or direct realization of that which is said to be endlessly elusive, ungraspable, unattainable? Behind these paradoxical utterances is Abe's ontology of the Self as Absolute Subject, Absolute Subjectivity. The Self is that absolute " 'Mind', 'Seeing', 'Knowing', 'Activity' " which exists prior to and in turn grounds the subject-object structure of self-consciousness. The Self is "the absolute Subjectivity at the root-source of human objectification" (74). Unobjectifiable and ab-

solute, “pure Seeing” is “*causa sui* and completely free in the sense of ‘What-it-is-that-thus-comes’” (67).

In view of Heidegger’s attack on the onto-theo-logical concept of the Self as pure Subject or transcendental Subjectivity, Abe’s concept of the true self would seem, at first glance, problematic. Must not this “Zen” concept of the Self which Abe uses to criticize the subject-object structure of the Western tradition be itself subjected to a Heideggerian critique?

Several questions could perhaps be raised:

(1) Grammatically, the lexical indicator ‘I’, when used as the subject of the sentence, does not perform the same role as the ‘I’ in the object of the sentence (“I am asking, ‘Who am I?’”). But does this entitle us to draw ontological conclusions about the intrinsic ungraspability, unattainability, of the ‘I’? One thinks of Wittgenstein’s analysis of private language. Does the grammatical fact that “*you* cannot feel *my* toothache” suggest there is a realm of private experience that is forever beyond the cognitive grasp of another self? Similarly, does the grammatical fact that “I can never really grasp myself in the act of having a toothache” suggest that the Self which “has” or “experiences” that toothache is really epistemically inaccessible to itself? Don’t these conundrums simply result from mistaking grammatical tautologies for profound epistemological or ontological truths?

(2) Another difficulty with Abe’s Zen alternative is that it is forced by its own logic (its critique of any “objectifying” of the Self viewed as absolute Subject) to use mostly negative terms to characterize the positive substance of its “positionless position”. Terms like “absolute”, “immediate”, or “non-objectifiable” are parasitic on their positive counterparts. But as Heidegger points out in his response to Sartre—who saw “existentialism” as reversing the metaphysical proposition, “essence precedes existence” to read: “existence precedes essence”—the negation of a metaphysical proposition is still a metaphysical proposition, and remains caught in the onto-theo-logical tradition it is attempting to criticize. Such is the case, I suggest, with Abe’s characterization of the true Self as “absolute” Subject and “non-objectifiable” Subjectivity, despite his dialectic of double-negation.

(3) Even if we were to grant that Abe’s concept of the true self as absolute subjectivity could somehow escape the force of a Wittgensteinian or Heideggerian critique, there remains the problem of explaining

how and why it is that this pure activity of Seeing, which is prior to the distinction of seer and seen, this absolute Subjectivity which precedes the distinction of subject and object in (ego) self-consciousness—how and why this pure activity gives rise to the structure and subsequent activity of subject-object consciousness. Abe claims that it does, but nowhere explains how or why. He gives no account of the transcendental “constitution” or phenomenological “genesis” of subject-object consciousness out of this prior activity of “pure” Subjectivity. By contrast, Heidegger, in his critique of the transcendental subject of Western onto-theology, has given a detailed account of the genesis of subject-object consciousness already in his early work, *Being and Time*.

## 2. Concepts, Thinking, and Language

Abe’s critique of the “objectifying” nature of ordinary (ego) self-consciousness and his appeal to a “non-objectifying” or “pure” activity of Mind, Seeing, Knowing or Subjectivity as true Self carries over to his view of such phenomena as the conceiving, thinking and speaking associated with subject-object consciousness. These, too, he contrasts to ways of conceiving, thinking and speaking which are “pure” or “non-objectifying”.

(i) *Conceptualization*. With the overcoming of the subject-object distinction characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness, we overcome the duality of subject and object—that is, we overcome not only the notion of the self as ego, as subject of this dualistic structure of self-consciousness, we also overcome the notion of the objects of such consciousness, of things as objects of the subject of such consciousness. Thus we are freed to see things as they really are in themselves (5-8). The acts of conceptualization that lead to the differentiation of subject and object represent attempts to objectify not only the true Self but also the world of things. The overcoming of such acts of conceptual objectification leads to the direct realization of “the non-differentiated sameness—which is at once the clearest differentiation—of ultimate Reality”, where things are disclosed as they really are in themselves, free of the objectifying, or differentiating, or “dualistic” structure of subject-object consciousness (12). In saying that the distinction of ‘seer’ and ‘seen’ is overcome, Abe is also saying that the dualistic differentiation of ultimate Reality from ultimate Subjectivity is likewise

overcome—so that Reality is seen as it really is, in itself, free of the objectifications of our conceptual processes (10, 17). When we conceptualize things, we can then understand them “only insofar as they are objectified and *not* as they are *in themselves*” (217). Zen, by contrast, approaches things non-conceptually (17).

(ii) *Thinking*. Thinking that proceeds on the basis of such acts of conceptual or cognitive differentiation Abe calls *substantive* thinking: “substantive thinking objectifies and substantializes things” (102, 112). The “ultimate thinking” that characterizes his Zen philosophical standpoint is, by contrast to our ordinary, subject-object thinking, a kind of “non-thinking”, thinking which “transcends thinking in the usual sense” (112). It represents “a fundamental critique of the nature of thinking asserting that human thinking is essentially a substantive one” (ibid.). Zen’s ‘non-thinking’ represents the overcoming of the “dualistic and discriminative” nature of our normal, subject-object structure of consciousness (ibid.). Zen philosophy, says Abe, “is a philosophy based on ‘non-thinking’ which is beyond both thinking and not thinking” (xxi); it is an ultimate or absolute thinking which “transcends both relative thinking and relative not-thinking” (112). It is a thinking which allows things to be disclosed as they really are, as they are in themselves, not as the ‘objects’ of thinking grounded in our ordinary, subject-object structured consciousness.

(iii) *Language*. If things as they really are, in themselves, elude the conceptual grasp of an objectifying, substantializing way of thinking, then they cannot be made the objects of ordinary propositional assertion. When the true Self says that “Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters”, it is not talking objectively about things. It is, says Abe, the true Self talking about itself. Nor, on the other hand, are such statements about mountains and waters symbolic assertions about the Self: “rather the true Self is talking about mountains and waters *as its own Reality*” (16). It is talking, paradoxically, in a non-objectifying, non-conceptual way that transcends words, transcends language. It is a kind of ultimate non-talking, an absolute non-speech, that is nonetheless not to be confused with either symbolic utterance or silence: “since Zen is concerned with the *truly* unspeakable, it rejects not only speech, but mere silence as well” (22). Just as Zen thinking is ultimate thinking-as-non-thinking, Zen speech is ultimate speech, a non-speaking that transcends relative speaking and relative non-speak-

ing (silence), speech and silence, in their usual sense:

Zen always expresses the 'unspeakable' Reality which is beyond affirmation and negation, speech and silence, in a direct and straightforward way, and presses us to present our understanding of this Reality through the injunction 'Speak! Speak!' (22)

### 3. Things As They Really Are In Themselves.

Underlying these assertions of the objectifying nature of our ordinary modes of conceiving, thinking and speaking is Abe's basic ontological doctrine, one which stands in systematic relation to his notion of the unobjectifiable nature of ultimate Subjectivity—namely, the unobjectifiable nature of ultimate Reality. It is this doctrine which allows him to distinguish between things as objects of objectifying (substantializing) concepts, thinking or speech, and things as they really are in themselves. "Mountains really are mountains, waters really are waters" is an assertion free of the dualistic distortions of ordinary consciousness, conceptualization, thought or speech. Abe's doctrine of the unobjectifiable nature of ultimate reality is his most fundamental ontological assumption.

In the state of ordinary, subject-object consciousness, when mountains are identified as mountains and thereby differentiated from waters, and vice versa, "mountains are understood as mountains in that they are objectified . . . by us, and not understood as mountains *in themselves*. . . . 'Mountains are mountains' only insofar as they are objectively looked at from our subjective point of view and are not grasped in themselves. . . . There is a duality of *subject* and *object* in this understanding" (5). By contrast, when the subject-object dichotomy is overcome, we not only attain a direct realization of the pure Subjectivity that lies at the ground of that dichotomy, we also discern that "mountains and waters disclose themselves . . . no longer as objects from our subjective vantage point" (10). Rather, they disclose themselves as they really are, in their 'Reality' as . . . mountains and waters.

In breaking through the dualistic structure of our subject-object objectifying consciousness, says Abe, the wall between subject and object is overcome, and we attain a direct realization of "the non-differen-

tiated sameness—which is at once the clearest differentiation—of ultimate Reality”. The ultimate Reality of mountains and waters retain their differentiated particularity at the same time as they are seen in their nondifferentiated sameness with each other and with the true Self. It is, to borrow a phrase from Richard DeMartino, a direct realization of the nondualistic ‘duality’ of mountains and waters, Self and Reality.

My difficulty here, as also noted in my reservations about Abe’s notion of pure or absolute Subjectivity, is that these “anti-metaphysical” utterances remain confined within the precincts of metaphysical speech. They do not, despite Abe’s dialectic of double negation, break out of the onto-theo-logical problematic of the Western tradition of philosophy. Here, too, the negation of a metaphysical proposition, even the negation of the negation of a metaphysical proposition, still remains a mode of metaphysical discourse. This point becomes clearer when we look at the onto-theo-logical character of Abe’s interpretation of being, time, truth, and the nature of metaphysics itself.

## B.

### 1. Metaphysics.

Despite his forceful critique of the metaphysical tradition of the West, Abe himself views his Zen “anti-metaphysical” thinking as itself a species of metaphysical thinking: it is “a *metaphysical* standpoint in the best sense of the word” (85). In fact, his explicit goal is to “try, on the basis of such a metaphysical standpoint, to bring under one purview the philosophical thought of the West and East” (ibid.).

Abe sees his effort as involving an encounter of three metaphysical principles—the Aristotelian “fundamental principle” of Being, the Kantian principle of the Ought, and the Buddhist principle of Nothingness as advanced, e.g., by the Indian philosopher, Nagarjuna (85–86). Each of these metaphysical principles has “an *absolute or non-relative character*”, “transcending relativity and forming the fundamental principle of the possibility of metaphysics” (ibid.). Abe calls these three metaphysical principles—Being, Ought, Nothingness—“each taken in the absolute sense, the three *fundamental categories* for human thought, and accordingly, for human existence itself” (87). And, “Since these three categories each have a transcendental and ab-

solute element, irreducible either to one another or to anything else, these three categories alone can be considered to be truly *fundamental*" (ibid.). In other words, for Abe these categories have the onto-theo-logical nature and function of traditional metaphysical principles.

First, the nature of metaphysical principles such as Nagarjuna's Nothingness (Abe also uses the German *Nichts*, the Japanese *Mu*, the Buddhist *Sunyata*, and the English Emptiness") is described as: "ultimate" or "ultimate Reality" (xxi-xxii, 36); "absolute", beyond the dualism of "relative" being and "relative" non-being (10, 73, 86, 94); "infinite" (36); "pure", because "free from discrimination" (217-218); "true", because it discloses all beings as they truly are (10, 14, 94); "original", prior to the differentiation of being and non-being, and of beings, from one another (16, 17, 33, 225); and, finally, "free", "*causa sui*" (35-36, 67), that "which spontaneously develops itself" (270). Abe accompanies these ontological predicates with absolutizing qualifiers such as "real", "really", "true", "truly", "very", "genuine", and "nothing but" (cf. 218).

Second, these absolutizing adjectives and adverbs describing the metaphysical principle of Nothingness also indicate its ontological and epistemological functions.

Metaphysically, these fundamental principles, whether Being, Ought or, as in this case, Nothingness, serve the traditional onto-theo-logical function of pointing to the metaphysical ground, basis, origin, or "root-source" of all beings (14, 16-18, 23, 33, 66, 74, 94, 128, 176). For example:

. . . true Emptiness (absolute Nothingness) is absolute Reality which makes all phenomena, all existents, truly *be*. (94)

Thus true Emptiness [absolute *Mu*] is wondrous Being, absolute *U*, the fullness and suchness of everything, or *tathata*; it is ultimate Reality which, being beyond *u* and *mu* [relative being and relative non-being], lets both *u* and *mu* stand and work just as they are in their reciprocal relationship. (128)

. . . in Nirvana everything and everyone are equal and returns, through human realization, to oneness as the ontological ground prior to their differentiation. . . . Nirvana is not an objectively observable state but is human realization

of the ultimate ground of both subject and object, of both self and world. (177)

Epistemologically, the principle of Nothingness, which is non-dually identical with the "true Self", serves as the source of subject-object or ego-consciousness and hence of the world of differentiated things, and as the basis for overcoming these distinctions in the direct realization of wondrous Being: "'Nothingness' thus made absolute by Nagarjuna [is] the basic principle which truly discloses reality as such. . . ." (94).

## 2. Being, Time and Truth.

Behind Abe's description of the principle of Nothingness lies what would also appear to be an onto-theo-logical understanding of being, time, truth, and reality.

(1) *Being*. In addition to ground, source, origin, and basis, 'being' has other onto-theo-logical significations:

- (i) *identity*: "undifferentiated sameness" (12);
- (ii) *simplicity*: "pure", "free of discrimination" (217-218);
- (iii) *unity*: "oneness as the ontological ground prior to their differentiation" (177);
- (iv) *infinite, all-embracing, universal existentially*, embracing all beings: "the 'being' dimension is truly boundless" (35), "the dimension of being—non-being that is common to all beings" (41), "this infinite, ontological basis common to all beings" (41), "It is 'all beings' in its absolute sense which is beyond and freed from the opposition between being and non-being" (46);
- (v) *universal essentially*, as "the original, fundamental nature of all beings" (33), the Reality in which we are "*originally and essentially* enlightened" (220);
- (vi) the fundamental "*that-ness*" or "*as-it-isness*" of being-as-existence itself: it is "the fullness and suchness of everything, or *tathata*" (128); "'everything is empty' may be more adequately rendered in this way: 'Everything is just as it is' " (223); *everything in its suchness is really* what it is, "no more, no less" (226-227);
- (vii) the pure *presence* of being: "the *absolute present*" (17), the absolute "here and now" (220);

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(viii) *pure being* prior to *becoming*,: “Prior to ‘becoming pure’ we are originally and essentially ‘being pure’ . . . . As the ground ‘being pure’, Original Purity, can stand without ‘becoming pure’ ” (220, 222);

(ix) *aseity*: that from which all else proceeds, itself uncaused, self-caused, spontaneous, full, absolute Activity, *actus purus* (66, 220).

To summarize: for Abe, the meaning of ‘being’ bears a remarkable resemblance to the traditional Western understanding of Being characterized by such onto-theo-logical predicates as: identity, simplicity, unity, universality, totality, essence (the ‘What’ of all beings), existence (the ‘That’ of all beings), presence, priority to becoming, aseity, *causa sui*, *actus purus*.

(2) *Time*. Abe’s concept of being rests on a corresponding concept of time like that of the Western onto-theo-logical tradition—*pure* or *absolute presence*. This link of being and time is mediated by a twofold sense of presence (‘here and now’): “the realization of everything being really just as it is . . . takes place in the absolute present” (17). In this “moment” of realization even “the implication of temporal sequence” (movement from the ‘stage’ of pre-enlightenment to the ‘stage’ of enlightenment, for example) is overcome. Such a notion of sequential temporality is “illusory”. The realization of the ‘suchness’ of all beings which takes place in the ‘absolute present’ is not an event “in time”. Rather, the ‘absolute Present’, “being beyond time, is the ground or original basis . . . from which temporal sequence can legitimately begin” (ibid.). This realization of the absolute Present takes place in the moment, in any moment. In fact, it involves “the paradoxical unity of time and eternity at each and every moment” (55). Thus, Abe rejects the notion that our true Self (our “Buddha nature”) is a *potential* to be realized as some *future time*. It is rather our *original nature* realized in the *moment, here and now, of the absolute present* (61): “the Buddha-nature always manifests itself as time, specifically as present time” (62). Abe, with Dōgen, rejects those views which “look for eternity beyond the present moment” (63). Abe, with Dōgen, “denies continuity of time and emphasizes the independence of each point of time.” Each moment of time enjoys complete, absolute ontological independence: time as absolute *present* is at the same time be-

ing as absolute *presence*: “at every moment time fully manifests itself” (64); ‘there is no time that is not also fullness of time’ (64–65); ‘all times . . . manifest eternity. Yet this takes place here and now in the absolute present’ (66). We are not “on the way”, “in process toward”, our essential Being, our true Self. We “already and always” *are*, “here and now, and only in the here and now”, *originally* and *essentially* our true Self (219–220).

In sum, for Abe, Dōgen’s equation, “being is time, time is being”, is to be understood not in Whiteheadian or Heideggerian terms as process ontology or ontology of the radical temporality of Being (*unterwegs zum Sein*), but in classic onto-theo-logical terms: Being and Time as Absolute Presence and Absolute Present (one thinks, for example, of Tillich’s “Eternal Now”).

(3) *Truth*. Abe also draws on a traditional onto-theo-logical concept of ‘truth’: truth as “complete disclosure”.

First, linked to *being*: commenting on Dōgen’s statement about our Buddha nature or true Self: “Throughout the universe nothing has ever been concealed”, Abe says, “This clearly refers to the complete disclosure of ‘all beings’ . . .” (36):

When grasped neither in terms of the duality of body and soul, nor in terms of the duality of potentiality and actuality, all beings manifest themselves right here and now in their wholeness, totality, and suchness. This complete disclosure of ‘all beings’ takes place only in the dehomocentric boundless universe which is most fundamental for everything. (277, n.14)

Or, linking truth to being as Self: “With this awakening to the true Self, ultimate Reality is disclosed in its entirety” (14).

Second, linked to time as absolute present: Abe says that in the moment of realization “the absolute present is completely disclosed” (17). The ‘moment’ as absolute present is, in turn, the ‘truth’ (complete disclosure) of time: “at every moment time *fully manifests* itself” (64).

Epistemologically, too, while a Western subject-object mode of thinking “veil[s] our insight into the nature of life and reality”, in Zen all these veils are “swept aside”. Instead we return to the “root-source (the true or self-less Self)” which discloses reality as it is in itself, prior to our acts of cognitive distortion. In the moment of of insight we

realize a truth which is "truly pure because . . . free from discrimination". In this return to the "root-source" "everything . . . is disclosed as pure in its original nature". When we are thus "totally awake", genuinely "enlightened", we see all beings as they really are in themselves . . . truly: completely disclosed (218).

(4) *Reality*. As these comments on truth indicate, a corollary of Abe's notion of truth is his notion of what it is that truth discloses: it discloses ultimate Reality, the totality of beings, *as they really are in themselves*. The notion of "complete disclosure" ("free of all discriminations") and the notion of beings "as they really are", "in themselves" ("free of all discrimination") are, finally, synonymous. By the 'reality' of things we mean not simply their bare existence, their mere 'thatness' or 'suchness', but their 'being', their 'suchness', their 'thatness' as they *truly* are, free of any distortion, as they disclose themselves to us from themselves, not as we discriminate or differentiate them. In the complete disclosure that is the truth of Zen realization, "mountains are affirmed *really* as mountains, and waters are affirmed *really* as waters in their Reality" (10). Zen achieves the "realization of everything being really just as it is" (17). In Zen awakening, "everything in the world is real in itself" (18). "All beings can exist respectively as they are" (36). In Nothingness, "everything is really as it is" (211). All beings are *seen truly*, "free of discrimination", not as "objectified" by our subject-object ("impure") consciousness, but "as they are in themselves" ("pure") (217):

This is why 'Emptiness' is also called as-it-is-ness or suchness. Emptiness is not a mere emptiness, but rather fullness in which the distinctness of everything is realized in a thoroughgoing manner. (247)

In calling attention to these facts, I have not looked at Abe's use of the principle of Nothingness in his dialectic of affirmation through the negation of negation on which he rests his case for having overcome the traditional Western assignment of priority to being over nonbeing. It is possible that he would view this dialectic as also being a critique of the onto-theo-logical understanding of being, time and truth which I have ascribed to him. I am arguing, however, that the onto-theo-logical nature of the underlying rhetoric and assumptions which support his philosophy in fact constitutes a "metaphysical form" which

deconstructs the "anti-metaphysical content" of his first-order claims. To develop this point further it will be necessary to conduct a more direct *Auseinandersetzung* or dialogue between Abe's onto-theological reading of Zen and the post-onto-theo-logical thinking of recent Western thinkers, Heidegger in particular. If I am correct, a critique of Abe's Zen philosophy would mean a critique of his critique of Western thought as well.

## VI

We may begin this dialogue by looking at some of the differences Abe finds between his Zen philosophy and Western thought. My argument will be twofold: first, that some of these differences may conceal similarities which call into question critical conclusions Abe draws concerning the superiority of Zen philosophy in those instances. Second, that the cases of genuine difference may be different than Abe says, such that critical evaluation in those cases may lead to an opposite conclusion, namely, the possible superiority of Western thought to Zen philosophy. At the very least there may be room and need for more discussion before evaluative conclusions can be drawn.

1. The difference between Zen and Western concepts of 'Nothingness' and 'Being'.

Abe believes that the Buddhist principle of Nothingness is ontologically irreducible to the Western categories of Being or Ought. These concepts are embedded in doctrinal structures that entail further systematic differences between Zen philosophy and Western thought (xxi-xxii, 188). These conceptual and systematic differences are reflected in difficulties of translation from East-Asian to Western systems of language and thought.

Take first the concept of Nothingness, in Japanese: *mu*, in its absolute sense, *Mu*: "*mu*, which stands for the English term 'non-being', has an important connotation which is different from 'non-being'" (281, n.3). In part, this may be because this ontological concept arises out of an attempt to express a quite different religious or existential experience, for Abe claims that "the *negativity* of human life is felt more seriously and deeply in Buddhism than among the followers of Western intellectual traditions" (130):

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The difference between Western intellectual traditions and Buddhism in their understanding of *negativity* in human life involves not only an ontological issue but also an existential and soteriological one. (131)

Zen terms containing 'nothingness' (*mu*) "probably cannot be adequately rendered into any European language because there is nothing in the Western way of thinking corresponding to them" (284, n.21). Similarly, of the Zen word for Being, *u*, in its absolute sense as 'wondrous Being', *U*, Abe says: "the Buddhist idea of wondrous Being is absolutely different from the idea of 'Being' understood as ultimate Reality in the West" (130).

The main reason for the difference of Zen Nothingness and Zen Being from Western Nonbeing and Western Being, says Abe, is that the latter are understood *dualistically* or *dialectically*, whereas in Zen: "True Emptiness [*Mu*] and wondrous Being [*U*] are completely non-dualistic: absolute *Mu* and ultimate Reality [*U*] are totally identical" (ibid.). In the Western tradition Being is dualistically conceived vis-à-vis Nonbeing, and Being is not "realized" *through* the prior realization of Nonbeing: "It is not considered to be beyond the antinomy of being and non-being but rather gains its ultimate status by virtue of its being metaphysically prior to non-being" (ibid.). In the Zen understanding, on the other hand:

*mu* is not one-sidedly derived through negation of *u*. *Mu* is the negation of *u* and *vice versa*. One has no logical or ontological priority to the other. Being the complete counter-concept to *u*, *mu* is more than privation of *u*, a stronger form of negativity than 'non-being' as understood in the West. (127)

The Buddhist concept of Nothingness, therefore, represents "overcoming that antinomic, self-contradictory oneness of *u* and *mu*. . . . *u* and *mu* are paradoxically and self-contradictorily identical" (128-129). Clearly, *mu* and *u* are not adequately rendered by Western philosophy's terms, 'being' and 'non-being'.

What evaluative conclusions does Abe draw from this ontological and linguistic-conceptual incommensurability? First, that "Emptiness replaces God" (167). Second, that, on the one hand, to the extent

Heidegger's understanding of 'being' remains embedded in the Western metaphysical tradition it is *different* from Zen and must be overcome if we are to understand the Zen concepts of *mu* and *u* (47–48, 119), whereas, on the other hand, if Heidegger's concept of 'being' is different from and a critique of the Western tradition it is therefore *close* to Zen (119, 134).

With regard to the first claim I shall argue that beneath the difference between Zen Nothingness and the Western concept of God there is an even more important similarity, one that is problematic if not fatal for Abe's Zen critique of the Western concept of God. With regard to the second claim I shall argue that there is indeed a difference between Heidegger's Being and Zen's Nothingness (also Heidegger's concept of time and Dogen's concept of time), but that it is of a different sort and leads to a different conclusion: that to the extent Heidegger's concept of Being remains embedded in the Western ontotheological tradition, he remains *close* to Abe's Zen philosophy, whereas to the extent Heidegger's concept of Being rests on a critique of Western metaphysics, it remains *far* from Abe's philosophy and indeed raises the counter-possibility that Abe's understanding of *mu* and *u* must be overcome if we are to understand the truly radical nature of Heidegger's *different* way of thinking about Being.

## 2. "Emptiness replaces God"

The use of the word "replaces" gives pause. If 'Emptiness' and 'God' are irreducibly different principles, how can one be said to replace the other? Or, despite their difference in ontological content, do they share a more important underlying similarity in ontological function? Both are the fundamental principles in their respective thought-systems. The question hinges therefore not on their difference in content but on how Abe sees the role of the 'Nothingness' in his Zen philosophy. Is it different from the logical or metaphysical role that the words 'God' or 'Being' play in Western onto-theo-logical thought? If not, what should we make of his critique of those Western categories? How does his own concept of Nothingness meet the criticism he raises against 'God' and 'Being'? Abe's first objection, as we have seen, is to what he calls the Western ascription of "ontological priority" to being over nonbeing: "Some Western thinkers such as Paul Tillich would insist that . . . non-being is, logically and ontologically, dependent on be-

ing and not vice versa. Hence the priority of being over non-being" (109). This assumption must be challenged: "The priority of (*u*) over (*mu*) non-being is not *ontologically* justifiable. . . . Herein, we see the essential difference in understanding the *negativity* of beings, including human existence, between the West and the East, especially as exemplified in Buddhism" (ibid.). "Priority" in this context seems to mean for Abe the direction of the derivation of one concept from another. Tillich's comments imply what Abe calls a "one-sided derivation" of nonbeing (*mu*) from being (*u*), nonbeing (*mu*) being the *one-sided negation* of being (*u*). Tillich himself says: "Nonbeing is dependent on the being it negates" (*Courage to Be*, 40). There seems to be a logical necessity at work here: "There would be no negation if there was no preceding affirmation to be negated" (ibid.)

Abe asks, cogently, what sort of ontological justification is that? Even semantically what sense does it make? For Abe

*mu* is not a negative form of *u* (being) and is not, like *me on* or non-being, one-sidedly derived through a negation of *u*. Being the complete counter-concept to *u*, *mu* is a more powerful form of negation than 'non-being'. In other words, *mu* is on equal footing with and is reciprocal to *u*. Accordingly, it can both be said that *mu* is the negation of *u*, and also that *u* is the negation of *mu*. But if *mu* is absolutized in principle, it can transcend and embrace within itself both *u* and *mu* in their relative senses. The Buddhist idea of Emptiness may be taken as *Mu* in this absolute sense. (94)

It is this Emptiness which replaces Tillich's Being. This enables us to understand not only Abe's critique of the Western one-sided or dualistic concept of Being, but also his description of, for example, Nagarjuna's standpoint of absolute Nothingness "which transcends both being and non-being" (86), or his claim that "not relative *mu* but absolute *Mu*, i.e. true *Sunyata*, is central and must be actualized if ultimate Reality, wondrous Being, is to be disclosed. . . . absolute *Mu* and ultimate Reality are totally identical, although the realization of the former is indispensable for the realization of the latter" (130). Thus, Abe concludes:

the difference between Western intellectual traditions and

Buddhism in their respective understandings of 'Being' as the ultimate Reality depends on whether or not the realization of absolute *Mu* is essential for its disclosure and whether or not relative *mu* (non-being) is understood as completely equal and reciprocal to relative *u* (being). (ibid.)

Two questions come to mind: (1) Is Abe correct in his criticism of the Western assertion of the priority of being over nonbeing (in the case of Tillich, for example)? Is it true that the Western onto-theo-logical tradition lacks a concept of ultimate being as dependent for its disclosure on the concept of absolute Nothingness, a concept in whose absolute sense the relative senses of both being and nonbeing are simultaneously transcended and embraced? Taking only the case cited by Abe, it is not immediately clear that Tillich fails this test. For Tillich also says in the same work cited by Abe:

Certainly one can describe being in terms of non-nonbeing [as the negation of a negation, a move often used by Abe]; and we can justify such a description by pointing to the astonishing prerational fact that there is something and not nothing. One could say that "being is the negation of the primordial night of nothingness." But in so doing one must realize that such an aboriginal [i.e., absolute, beyond both relative being and relative nonbeing] nothing would be neither nothing [relative nonbeing] nor something [relative being, an 'objectified something']. . . (*Courage to Be*, 40)

Earlier in the same text Tillich says: "if being is interpreted in terms of life or process or becoming, non-being is ontologically as basic as being. The acknowledgment of this fact does not imply a decision about the priority of being over nonbeing, but it requires a consideration of nonbeing in the very foundation of ontology" (ibid., 32). Finally, noting that all talk about absolute Being or absolute Nothingness is symbolic or metaphorical, Tillich says, "If one is asked how nonbeing is related to being itself, one can only answer metaphorically: being 'embraces' itself and nonbeing" (ibid., 34).

Tillich's statements are striking in light of Abe's critique of Tillich and his own descriptions of Nothingness and the relation of being and nonbeing within the concept of absolute Nothingness. What strikes

one are not the differences but the similarities. First, it is not true that Tillich is unwilling to consider a way of approaching the relation of being and nonbeing that looks very much like Abe's: taken in the absolute sense, Tillich says, we could just as well start with absolute Nothingness ("aboriginal nothing"), transcending the relative senses of being and nonbeing, and within which the subsequent differentiation of (relative) being and (relative) nonbeing takes place. Tillich would seem clearly to be drawing on the tradition of Western, especially German, mysticism, for example, Meister Eckhart, in such pronouncements. Second, it is also not true that Tillich is unable or unwilling to conceive of nonbeing as ontologically as basic as ("completely equal and reciprocal"), not prior to, being, and as equally involved in the foundation of ontology—again, within an absolute sense of Being as transcending and "embracing" both (relative) being and (relative) nonbeing. Where does this leave the fundamental difference between Tillich and Abe? It is not immediately so clear.

(2) This leads to a second question. Given the "completely equal and reciprocal" relationship of (relative) being and (relative) nonbeing, why is it to be concluded that absolute *Mu* is ontologically prior to absolute *U*? Though they are said to be "completely non-dualistic", that is, "totally identical", nonetheless Abe insists that, in contrast to Western thinking about Being, for Zen philosophy absolute *Mu* is logically and ontologically prior to absolute *U*: "the realization of the former is indispensable for the realization of the latter" (130). Again: "absolute *Mu*, i.e. true *Sunyata*, is central and must be actualized if ultimate Reality, wondrous Being, is to be disclosed" (ibid). Abe nowhere indicates that the reverse might be equally and reciprocally true.

If *Mu* and *U*, taken in their absolute and not relative sense, are "complete non-dualistic", "totally identical", why are they not, like their relative counterparts, also "completely equal and reciprocal"? Why cannot it just as truthfully be said: absolute *U* "is indispensable for the realization of" absolute *Mu*? Why does Abe appear to reinstate, at the level of these absolute notions, a new ontological priority, a new "one-sided derivation"? Since the logic of his critique of the Western tradition and of his Zen alternative would seem to require a more reciprocal ('non-dualistic') assertion here, the only explanation I can give is that it is necessary for his case against the "ontological priority over Being

over Nonbeing” in the West to represent his own position in what appears to be an equally one-sided way. A more felicitous expression in the context of a genuine dialogue or “two-way” exchange between Abe and Tillich would be to say that at the level of such ‘absolutes’, the ‘derivation’ or ‘priority’ can go either way, “equally and reciprocally”. They are both non-dual ways of “saying the same”, something like: “Absolute *Mu* and absolute *U* are completely non-dualistic, totally identical, equal and reciprocal: the realization of one is, non-dually and completely reciprocally, the realization of the other: the realization of the latter is the realization of the former”. Or, to put it in a Heideggerian orthography: “absolute *Mu*:absolute *U*:: absolute *U*:absolute *Mu*”.

We can now discuss the fuller implications of Abe’s claim, “Emptiness replaces God”. Just as “*Mu* replaces *U*” can be taken not as reversing the priority of *U* over *Mu*, but as clarifying the logic of *U* by bringing it closer to the logic of *Mu*, so, I shall argue, if Emptiness “replaces” God, it does so in by reinstating ‘God’ closer to the logic and ontology of Nothingness. But, to further the paradox, at the same time it draws the logic of Emptiness *closer* to, not *further away from*, the logic of God. If Emptiness “replaces” God, it perhaps does so for reasons other, and in ways different, than Abe may have had in mind. “Replacement” takes the form not of one-way critique and overcoming but of two-way dialogue and mutual transformation.

According to Abe, Buddhism asks a fundamental question of Western notions of God, one to which he sees no adequate answer forthcoming. Insofar as Buddhism provides an answer to that question, or more precisely, insofar as for Buddhism the question does not arise in the first place, the problematic assumptions which give rise to the concept of God having been already overcome, it can rightly be said that the Buddhist concept of Emptiness replaces the Western concept of God (167). How is that for Buddhism the concept of God, like Being, is said to be ontologically unjustifiable? To those familiar with the traditional Buddhist attack on the concept of self-existent being (*svabhava*, *u*) and its “replacement” of that concept with the concept of *anatman* (no-self, i.e., no self-existent being), or later, *Sunyata* (absolute nothingness, *mu*), it is clear what that unanswerable question must be. “Nothing whatsoever is independent or self-existing” (188). “Everything without exception is dependent on something else” (ibid.).

But according to the Western concept, "Because God is the self-existing deity, God can or does exist by himself without depending on anything else" (ibid.). But this raises Buddhism's basic question:

How is God's self-existence possible? What is the *ground* of God's self-existence? . . . . From a Buddhist point of view this idea of a self-sustaining God is ultimately inadequate, for Buddhists cannot see the ontological ground of this one and self-sustaining God. (188-189)

Abe is right. The problem this question raises for the Western tradition, given the logic of the term 'God' in that tradition, is absolutely unanswerable. However, I would draw the opposite conclusion. For exactly the same question can be raised of the Buddhist concept of Nothingness, and it would prove similarly unanswerable. One of the features of the logic or concept of God is that it is, as it were, the final word on things metaphysical or theological. "Why" questions, "what" questions, run out at that point. It is not a scandal against reason that no "answer" can be given to the "question", "what is the ground of God's being?" The scandal would lie rather in thinking that such a question was appropriate to ask in the first place: "When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words" (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.5). What looks like a genuine question is only a pseudo-question, because the term 'God', though it looks like an answer to a question, is rather a pointer to the fundamental mystery of being. The mystery of being (the mystery of the 'ground' of being or of God's being) is not a puzzle demanding an explanation, and the term 'God' is not an answer to such a demand. It functions rather to keep us open to 'wondrous' being.

If we persist in trying to ask the question nonetheless, the only "answer"—and it is an adequate "answer" under these logically peculiar circumstances, is: "because God just is, that's all." If asked, therefore, "How is God's self-existence possible? What is the ground of God's self-existence?", one could, "in answer to the question 'why', respond with 'it is so without why' or 'it is just as it is'." This would not be a failure to answer, much less a scandal to reason:

It is not a negative answer in the sense of abandoning inquiry into the 'why'. It is rather a positive and affirmative answer

which is realized within a thoroughgoing inquiry into 'why' and reached by breaking through the question 'why'. In short, the . . . answer 'without why' does not signify agnosticism as the mere absence of a positive answer to the question 'why', but, rather, indicates a great affirmation of Reality which cannot be analyzed by the question 'why' and hence is beyond it.

This statement seems, in the light of what we have just observed of the concept of God above, to be a perfectly adequate answer to the question, "What is the ground of God's being?" If we hold to the logic of the concept of God, there is nothing further that can or need be said (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.5, 6.51, 7). The source of this "answer" quoted above? Abe himself, explaining why it is that such questions come to an end vis-a-vis the ultimate concepts of Buddhism such as Emptiness or Nothingness, the ultimate "as-it-is-ness" or "suchness" of all things (248)!

### 3. Abe and Heidegger on 'Being' and 'Nothingness'.

The striking similarity, despite apparent differences, between Abe's concept of Nothingness and Western concepts of Being and God now suggests, in light of Heidegger's radical critique of the Western notions, that Abe's critique of Heidegger's concept of Being needs to be rethought as well. It also suggests the possibility of a genuine counter-critique of Abe's Zen philosophy of absolute Nothingness from the standpoint of Heidegger's thinking about Being. To the extent that Abe's critique of Western thought still moves, as I have argued, within an ontotheological understanding of the meaning of being, Heidegger, in his critique of that understanding of being, remains *far* from, not *close* to, Abe's Zen philosophy. Abe has suggested that one outcome of the Zen dialogue with Western thought is that Western thought might reexamine its traditional notions of Being and God (120). A further outcome of a Zen dialogue with Heidegger might be for Zen philosophy to reexamine its understanding of the traditional Buddhist doctrine of absolute Nothingness.

That Heidegger's understanding of Being is not only not close to Abe's Zen understanding of Being, but represents an entirely different way of thinking about Being than either Abe's or traditional Western

ontology's may be discerned in some of Abe's own remarks. Just as Abe suggests there are no equivalent terms in the Western philosophical vocabulary to translate Zen's *mu* and *u*, so there seem to be no equivalent terms in Abe's Zen vocabulary to translate Heidegger's 'Being' and 'Nothingness'. We see this if we look at Abe's comparing of Dōgen and Heidegger. Abe sees several differences between Dōgen's and Heidegger's understanding of *U* (Being) and *mu* (nonbeing). For Dōgen, unlike for Heidegger, there is no ontological difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*): "not because he is unaware of the essential differences between Being and beings, but simply because he deliberately denies the idea of *Sein*, which is apt to be considered something substantial, as ontologically distinguished from *Seiendes*" (47). Abe interprets Heidegger's Being (*Sein*) as referring to a 'something', a something 'outside' of all beings (*Seiendes*), whereas for Dōgen:

All beings are . . . just all beings, no more, no less; *nothing* is outside of them. For all beings, there is no possibility even for ontological difference. All beings are really and absolutely all beings—through the mediation of *nothing*. This is precisely the meaning of 'All beings are the Buddha nature'. (ibid.) In Dōgen it is "*Seiendes als solches* (beings as such) which must appear as nothing in order to be", whereas for Heidegger, "*Sein selbst* (Being itself) or *Sein als solches* (Being as such) . . . must be held down into nothingness; it must appear as nothing, in order to be" (ibid.).

Thus, for Dōgen, far from there being an ontological difference between 'Being' (Buddha nature) and 'beings', these are simply different "aspects" of "one and the same living reality" (45). 'Being' is "what-it-is-that-thus-comes"; 'all beings' are 'what-is-it-that-thus-comes'. These are simply two different ways of talking about the same ultimate Reality (48).

Behind these ontological assertions lie some simple linguistic facts: "Differing from most European languages, nouns in Chinese and Japanese generally make no distinction between singular and plural. Hence the term *u* can mean *beings*, *being*, or *Being-itself*. . . . Since the term *u* is used in this essay in contrast to *mu* and *ri*, the author, in most cases, uses the term without differentiating between beings, being and

Being itself" (281-2, n.3).

Abe interprets Heidegger's concept of Being (as different from beings) as if Heidegger were using it in an ontotheological sense as referring to something "substantial" (47), as some sort of "further embracing, deeper dimension . . . the ultimate ground", perhaps as "the place in which beings exist" (47). It still carries with it, unavoidably, traces of an "objectifying", 'substantializing' way of thinking. Abe concludes that:

it would seem that Heidegger's intention was rather to open up a new path of thinking following the traditional course of Western metaphysics without departing from the standpoint of thinking and to make the forgotten 'Being' present itself truly as 'Being' as such. (119)

Abe does think that Heidegger's focus on 'nothingness' has "opened up a standpoint extremely close to Zen" (119): "Nothingness opens up Being itself. Again, this is strikingly similar to the Buddhist understanding of Emptiness" (134). To that extent perhaps Heidegger's understanding of Being (*Sein selbst, Sein als solches*) is not the same as the traditional Western understanding of Being as the Being of beings (*Sein des Seienden*) such as found in Aristotle. But differences remain, so Heidegger is not yet close enough: "Only when the Heideggerian idea of ontological difference is overcome can Dōgen's idea of 'All beings are the Buddha nature' be truly understood" (48).

Abe criticizes Heidegger's concept of Being on yet another ground. For Abe, Being is completely "dehomocentric". In fact, as the most general or universal predicate for 'all beings', it is not "centric" in any sense. The "dimension of being" (or "being—non-being") is not the dimension of "birth-death" (the human dimension) nor of "generation-extinction" (the dimension of living beings). It is the dimension of "appearance-disappearance" (or "being—non-being"), of "coming to be and ceasing to be" in a sense that applies to *all beings*: "the 'being' dimension . . . embraces everything in the universe, by transcending even the wider-than-human 'life-centered' horizon. Accordingly the 'being' dimension is truly boundless, free from any sort of centrism, and deepest precisely in its dehomocentric nature" (35). Heidegger's Being "is not altogether freed from homocentrism" (65). Despite his focus on 'nothingness' instead of 'substance', Heidegger's thinking

on Being via *Dasein* “does not necessarily lead him to the completely dehomocentric cosmological dimension alone in which the impermanence of all beings in the universe is fully realized” (67).

Is Abe correct in his depiction of Heidegger’s position? If not, what counter-questions might Heidegger raise for Abe?

(1) Abe’s first point, that Heidegger’s thinking of Being and the ontological difference between Being and beings implies a ‘substantializing’ of Being, does not comport with the way Heidegger has dealt with the matter. Heidegger himself is clear, as Abe has noted, that Being is not the Being of beings in either of the two senses Aristotle’s concept conveyed. The term refers neither to the highest being (cause, ground) of all beings nor to the most universal feature of all beings *qua* beings. It follows, therefore, that when Heidegger speaks of the ontological difference between Being and all beings, he is not calling attention to a difference between all beings and some “further embracing, deeper dimension . . . the ultimate ground”, or “the place in which beings exist”. Perhaps because of the inevitability of misunderstandings of his language about ‘Being’ reflected in even as careful a reader as Abe, Heidegger gave up the term ‘Being’, preferring instead *Ereignis* (impossible to translate, but containing such notions as ‘event’ and ‘ownness’—openings for dialogue with ‘dependent co-origination’ and ‘true Self’?)

Abe himself draws a distinction between ‘being’ (‘beings’, ‘all beings’?) in the *relative* sense (*u*) and ‘Being’ (‘wondrous Being’) in the *absolute* sense (*U*). There is some sort of ‘ontological difference’ here, some reason for making this distinction, and yet Abe considers this ‘ontological difference’ perfectly compatible with the dialectically intriguing assertion that ‘Buddha nature’ is ‘all beings’. The “relation” between *U* (or *Mu*) and both *u* and *mu* is formulated as follows:

Thus true Emptiness is wondrous Being, absolute *U*, the fullness and suchness of everything, or *tathata*; it is ultimate Reality which, being beyond *u* and *mu*, lets both *u* and *mu* stand and work just as they are in their reciprocal relationship. (128)

Does this mean Abe thinks of absolute *U* as some “further embracing, deeper dimension . . . the ultimate ground . . . the place in which beings exist”? If so, is he not guilty of the charge he brings against Heideg-

ger? If not, it is not clear that Heidegger's thinking about Being and the ontological difference is any more guilty of these charges.

Again, Abe states the relation between 'Buddha nature' and 'all beings' as follows: The 'Buddha nature' is understood as the 'what' in 'what-is-it-that-thus-comes', and 'all beings' as the 'thus': "when Dōgen says the essence of 'All beings are the Buddha-nature' is well expressed in the words 'What-is-it-that-thus-comes', all beings appear in this sense of 'thus'. And the very fact that all beings 'thus' appear from 'What' indicates 'All beings are the Buddha-nature' " (48). Should we conclude from the substantializing grammar of these remarks that the 'What' is a kind of 'something', 'the ultimate ground', from which 'all beings' appear? If so, is Abe guilty of the charge he brings against Heidegger? At the very least it would seem there is room for more dialogue here than Abe's reading of Heidegger suggests.

(2) Abe's second criticism of Heidegger thinking on Being is that it is 'homocentric', not 'cosmological' or 'dehomocentric'. It has not yet reached the universal 'being-dimension' of 'appearance-disappearance' ('being—nonbeing'). Here, too, Abe may not only have misread Heidegger, but opened himself to a Heideggerian critique. Abe's remarks are added evidence of his traditional reading of the term 'being', this time in Aristotle's second sense as referring to the most universal features of being *qua* being, the 'being' of 'beings' (*Sein des Seienden*). But Heidegger's 'destruction' of the onto-theo-logical understanding 'being' was directed against just such a view of being as the most universal, all-embracing feature of beings. He aimed to expose the abstract, derivative character of the notion of being as the 'being' of 'beings' by going behind it to its roots in a more primordial (and radically temporal) meaning of being. Here too there may be a need for Abe to reexamine the presuppositions of his interpretation of being, perhaps to put to it the same critical questions that Heidegger has put to the Western concept.

## VII

Abe's reading of Heidegger's thinking about Being, in my judgment, points to some unresolved difficulties in his Zen philosophy that Abe himself admits remain outstanding.

The problem begins, according to Zen, with "the natural human tendency to objectify and substantialize everything" (43), "the stubborn

innate tendency toward duality" (165)—in other words, the subject-object duality of 'ego-self'-consciousness which differentiates things and ourselves from one another. This phenomenon is not accidental to human self-consciousness; it is "inherent in its structure." It is this tendency to see things in terms of the subject-object structure of consciousness which is overcome in realization of true Self, that absolute Activity or Subjectivity which is "the root-source of one's objectification in terms of the consciousness or intellect" (73). The true Self in turn "has no further root and yet is most active and creative as the source of one's objectification" (*ibid.*).

Precisely here too, from a Heideggerian perspective, is where the point of difficulty lies, but with a different twist. For it is the Zen understanding of the inherent subject-object structure of human consciousness which is itself, from a Heideggerian point of view, highly problematic. Nowhere does Abe provide an explanation of how or why the subject-object structure of consciousness arises out of this more primordial, 'pure', 'undifferentiated', 'absolute' activity of true Self. Such answers as are hinted at are transparently circular; they either beg the question or prejudge the outcome. It is the ego-self that is said to be "the basis of discrimination" (6). But that simply repeats the question. Why and how is the ego-self the source of the subject-object duality? What is *its* source? Specifically, what does it mean to say that the true Self is the root-source of the ego self? How and why does the ego-self come to be generated from the true Self? In short, what is the genesis of the subject-object structure of consciousness and, behind it, of the ego-self? So far as I can see, no answer to this question is forthcoming.

It is precisely the answer to this question—the question of the genesis of subject-object consciousness and, with it, the understanding of the meaning of being in the Western metaphysical tradition, insofar as it originated in that particular structure of consciousness—that Heidegger tried to provide in *Being and Time*. The all-important difference is that Heidegger understands subject-object consciousness, taken by Abe as "inherent" in the structure of human consciousness, to be a secondary phenomenon derived from the more fundamental, non-subject-object structure of what he calls "being-in-the-world". On the basis of this analysis, Heidegger is able to show how and why the structure of subject-object consciousness arises out of our everyday way of being-in-the-world. This deconstructs the traditional onto-theological

appeal to a transcendental activity of "absolute Subjectivity or Self" to account for the genesis or "innate tendency" of the subject-object structure of consciousness.

One of the virtues of Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* and *being-in-the-world* is that he is not forced to rely on ontological predicates formed by negating the terms normally used to talk about 'subjects', 'objects' and the 'self'. Abe's characterization of true Self, on the other hand, when it doesn't use positive terms from the vocabulary of the subject-object distinction itself, like 'self', thinking to have overcome the ontologically problematic status of such vocabulary by absolutizing the sense of the term (thus 'true Self'), instead employs terms based on the negation (or double negation) of the corresponding positive terms. *True* thinking is 'non-thinking', *true* realization is 'non-objectifying', etc. Heidegger sees these linguistic-conceptual moves as remaining embedded in the modes of metaphysical discourse they ostensibly overcome. They are linguistic clues that a genuine explanation of the genesis of 'subject-object consciousness' has still not been provided.

I wish to suggest, therefore, that a more radical reading of Heidegger's philosophy than Abe provides might, paradoxically, provide Abe with the conceptual resources for a more satisfactory phenomenological-ontological, and Zen, account of the rise of subject-object consciousness.

One of the first benefits to a Zen philosophy might be a more *positive* characterization of *ordinary* human consciousness than is available to an analysis that sees such awareness as inherently structured by a subject-object dualism. Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik* would enable a Zen understanding of human consciousness to distinguish, as does Heidegger, between the subject-object structure of consciousness, as a secondary or derivative existential-ontological phenomenon, and the more fundamental existential-ontological structural phenomenon of *being-in-the-world* which, on a Heideggerian analysis at least, is not structured by the dualism of subject-object. While Heidegger makes a further distinction between inauthentic and authentic modes of being-in-the-world, nevertheless this opens the possibility for Zen philosophy to give a more positive account of ordinary human consciousness than it has hitherto been able to do so long as it equated ordinary human consciousness with subject-object thinking.

## ZEN AND WESTERN THOUGHT

I introduce this possibility because Abe himself suggests that a more positive estimate of human consciousness is one of those areas in which a Zen philosophy needs to “internally embrace the standpoints of Western ‘Being’ and ‘Ought’ which have been foreign to itself” (120). Abe says of Zen:

It is rather based on a fundamental critique of the nature of thinking asserting that human thinking is essentially a substantive one. However, when Zen thus rejects thinking, does not Zen abandon human thinking without fully realizing its *positive* aspects which in the ancient Greek and the Western world broadly considered have been developed in the fields of knowledge of nature, mathematics, science, law, morality, etc.? In Zen, the positive and creative aspects of human thinking have been neglected and only its dualistic and discriminative aspects have been clearly realized as something to be overcome. . . . Essentially, the standpoint of Non-thinking should be able to be said to have the *possibility* of giving life to the positive aspects of human thinking which have been developed in the West. But this possibility has not yet been *actualized*. Precisely the actualization and existentialization of this possibility must be the theme of the future for the standpoint of the true ‘Emptiness’ of the Eastern tradition. (112)

Abe cites two types of thinking in particular where the Zen tradition’s negative account of ‘thinking’ could benefit from further dialogue with Western philosophical accounts:

Logic and scientific cognition based on substantive objective thinking, and moral principles and ethical realization based on Subjective practical thinking, have been very conspicuous in the West. In contrast to this, some of these things have been vague or lacking in the world of Zen . . . [Zen ‘Non-thinking’] always harbors the danger of degenerating into mere not-thinking. . . . that Zen today lacks the clue to cope with the problems of modern science, as well as individual, social, and international ethical questions, etc., may be thought partly to be based on this. (119–120)

Consequently, says Abe, “Zen must take up as its historical task to

place substantive thinking and Subjective thinking, which have been refined and firmly established in the Western world, within the world of its own Non-thinking" (120).

The problem lies in Zen's traditionally negative view of human consciousness as inherently characterized by a subject-object dualism. Abe's remarks do not really break with that perception, however. They acknowledge the problem, but the proposed solution is to somehow *incorporate* (rather than exclude) the subject-object way of thinking *within* a still unexamined notion of ultimate 'Non-thinking'. I suspect, as Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik* and alternative way of thinking about being suggest, that the effort to reconcile subject-object thinking and Non-thinking will call for a more radical rethinking of both terms of that relationship: of subject-object thinking in terms of a more fundamental mode of being-in-the-world from which its genesis can be explained, and of Non-thinking in terms of a reexamination of the implicit onto-theo-logical understanding of being which it seems to presuppose.

### VIII

So far this discussion has been cast solely in terms of a philosophical dialogue, a dialogue between Zen philosophy and Western thought. But before Zen is philosophy and beyond any philosophy that Zen may embrace, Zen is first and foremost a matter of religion. Its primary concern is the "realization" of the existential-soteriological "truth" of our lives. We need to consider what bearing this distinction has on our dialogue.

Abe supports the claim that there is such a thing as Zen philosophy distinct from the experience of Zen realization: "while in practice, Zen expresses and lives this philosophy in a non-philosophical, vivid, and direct way, the philosophical basis is never lacking" (xxi). While Zen is more than, and in the first instance other than philosophy, it does not exclude philosophy. In fact, it is implicitly grounded in a philosophy: "Although Zen transcends human intellect, it does not exclude it. . . . [Zen] includes a most profound philosophy, although Zen itself is not a philosophy" (23-24). Abe feels, rightly, that it is important to stress this point in order to correct a misunderstanding of Zen as "an anti-intellectualism, a cheap intuitionism, or an encouragement to animal-like

spontaneity without consideration of good and evil" (xxi; see also 23-24).

It is nevertheless true that Zen's primary concern is to grasp "the living Reality of life which can not be entirely captured only by intellectual analysis" (23). It aims to bring about a "radical and fundamental change of the basic mode of being of the self" (12). In other words, Zen's first concern is existential-transformative or "soteriological", not cognitive-epistemological or "metaphysical". It is first of all religion, and only secondarily philosophy.

This distinction, however, brings with it a problem. It can give rise to confused way of speaking, what might be called a "mixed" mode of discourse, in which the two different senses are not clearly distinguished. Statements that may be ontological in form and thus appear to be metaphysical assertions may in fact be functioning in an entirely different way as existential or soteriological assertions instead. To properly understand them, it is important to know whether what appear to be metaphysical assertions (for example, statements about the ontological structure of subject-object consciousness) are really such, or whether they are soteriological assertions in ontological disguise (for example, statements which reflect an existential transformation of consciousness). Despite his clear-cut distinction between Zen as a religion and Zen as a philosophy, some of Abe's "ontological" assertions seem to me examples of this problematic, mixed mode of speech:

(1) Abe speaks of self-estrangement and anxiety as being "not something *accidental* to the ego-self, but [as] inherent to its structure" (6). What kind of "structure" are we talking about? Is it an *ontological* structure, an *a priori* or necessary aspect of the metaphysical makeup of human beings? Or is it an *existential* "structure" in the sense of a concrete mode or way of being a human being—for example, the 'subject-object' way (cf. Heidegger's 'inauthentic' existence) as opposed to the 'true Self' way (cf. Heidegger's 'authentic' existence)? If the former, 'guilt' and 'self-estrangement' must be given a rather different, ontological interpretation, and cannot, as metaphysically necessary aspects of human being, be "overcome" by transformations of our existential mode of being. Rather, as Heidegger demonstrates in *Being and Time*, they will constitute the ontological *grounds* for the *possibility* of a variety of concrete, existential ways of being—from *angst* to enlightenment. If the latter, then 'guilt' and 'self-estrangement'

ment', while *tautologically* "inherent" in, because descriptive features of, what is *meant* by "ego-self" (again, cf. Heidegger's "inauthentic existence"), are *not* inherent in being a human being as such, and Abe's ontological-looking assertion loses much of its impact.

(2) Abe speaks of the "non-objective, non-conceptual, existential" nature and understanding of the ultimate reality and truth of which Zen philosophy speaks: "This paradoxical identity of the individual and the absolute cannot be fully understood objectively, but only non-objectively and existentially" (19). "True Emptiness and true fullness are dialectically one in a non-conceptual, existential way" (21). What kind of statements are these? Their appearance is certainly dramatic. They appear to give with one hand—ontological information—what they take away with the other—you can't understand them ontologically, only existentially. In one sense there is a profound truth at work here—actually a profound truism or tautology: you can't fully understand an experience intellectually. The problem is that this is true not just for the Zen realization of *Mu*, but for the taste of tea as well (though perhaps Abe would say these are, ultimately, nondually, the same). Thus one needs to ask: apart from the apparent ontological character of such statements, what is their existential function? Can we give a deontologized, existential reinterpretation of these peculiar utterances about the non-objective, non-conceptual nature of Zen truth?

As noted above, Zen's main concern is to bring about a "radical and fundamental change of the basic mode of being of the self" (12). The existential concern of Zen is with our basic *mode* of being, specifically the two *modes of being* designated by the quasi-ontological but functionally existential terms: 'ego-self' and 'true Self' (again: compare Heidegger's discussion of 'inauthenticity' and 'authenticity' as *Dasein's* two "basic *modes* of being"). This existential rather than ontological reading of ego-self and true-Self as terms pointing to two different "*ways of existing*" rather than two different "*structures of being*" provides a hermeneutical basis for an existential reading of Abe's ontological-looking assertions.

Take, for example, Dōgen's "All beings *are* the Buddha-nature" (39). This looks like an ontological assertion. But its existential function is very different. It serves to point to a transformation in our *way of seeing* 'all beings', that is, in our *way of being in the world*—from the existential perspective of the self-absorbed, self-alienated, estrang-

ed, anxious 'ego-self' *way of existing* to the enlightened, liberated, non-attached 'true-Self' *way of existing*. In this existential interpretation of Abe's ontological assertions, ego-self and true-Self (or Buddha-nature) do not function as ontological *referring* terms but as existential *qualifiers of modes of human existence*. It is not as if the metaphysical differentiation of 'mountains' and 'waters', 'all beings', 'others', and 'myself' suddenly disappear into undifferentiated ontological sameness. Rather, as Abe himself allows: "the distinctions between self and other, good and evil, life and death, are *regrasped* in the realization of suchness" (227). The 'suchness', the 'what thus comes', of 'all beings' is not some universal *ontological quality* they all share; it is a *transformed way of "seeing"* all beings, a transformation of our "basic mode of being" in the world.

The existential-functional rather than ontological-descriptive nature of these Zen "philosophical" assertions become particularly clear when we give in to the temptation, by mis-taking them as metaphysical statements, of asking further questions about such phenomena as 'Buddha-nature', 'true Self', 'absolute *Mu*', or 'What-thus-comes'. I have already alluded to this fact in challenging the legitimacy of Abe's Buddhist questions about the 'ground' of God's 'self-existence', suggesting that the concept of God here functions more like an *anti-concept*, an ultimate limiting notion that puts an end to a certain line of ontological questioning and instead confronts us existentially with an awareness of the ultimate mystery of being. Abe seems to be saying something similar in his characterization (and refusal) of ontological-looking 'Why' and 'What' questions directed at basic Buddhist anti-concepts like 'Nothingness' or 'Buddha-nature':

Accordingly, an interrogative such as 'what' or 'whence' does not *represent* the Buddha-nature. . . . This being so, the question 'What is it that thus comes?' is totally a question, and the word 'what' is also thoroughly an interrogative. Yet, at the same time 'what' is not a sheer interrogative, but is the Buddha-nature. Again 'What-is-it-that-thus-comes' is not a mere question, but is a realization of the Buddha-nature. (38)

In other words, the use of negatives, affirmatives, and interrogatives in the context of 'assertions' about Buddha-nature, true Self, and other such terms (and, I would say, about God) is not an ontologically

descriptive or referential use of language—it is not a matter of metaphysical propositions. Rather it is a performative or existential use of language—it is a matter of soteriological transformatives.

Nevertheless, the distinction between the language of religion and the language of philosophy and the attempt to provide an existential-soteriological or deontologized reading of the latter on behalf of the former does not mean a return to a kind of existential-religious anti-intellectualism or anti-metaphysics. On this point Abe is surely right. There is still a need for philosophical analysis and ontological description in order to clarify the nature and implicit presuppositions of Zen's existential "realization":

Authentic Zen realization or *satori*, even should it undergo rigorous intellectual analysis and philosophical reflection, will never be destroyed; on the contrary, analysis will serve to clarify that realization and confirm it more definitively in oneself, further enabling one to convey the depth of that realization to others, even through the medium of words. (23)

Zen realization needs Zen philosophy. On the other hand, Zen philosophy needs Zen realization. For it is only by returning to the roots of its own 'non-thinking' in Zen experience that Zen philosophy can shed light on the otherwise paradoxical-sounding utterances of traditional Zen texts:

Once we come to this existential realization, we can say with justification that *samsara* and *nirvana* are identical. Thus the realization of the Great Death is the crucial point for the seemingly paradoxical Mahayana doctrines. (166).

This point is of fundamental importance for the dialogue between Zen philosophy and Western thought. It is Zen experience, rather than any Western philosophical conceptuality, on which Zen philosophy must finally draw in its dialogue with the West.

This is particularly important if, as Abe contends, it is not the philosophical concepts of Nothingness, Being, Ought or God, but the differing 'experience of Being' from which the concepts of these two traditions are drawn, which is the source of the fundamental differences between Zen and Western thought. Behind the apparently irreducible differences between the metaphysical concepts of Nothing-

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ness and Being lie deeper, existential-soteriological differences in the experiences of the problematic nature of human existence and its appropriate modes of transformation or overcoming: "The difference between Western intellectual traditions and Buddhism in their understanding of *negativity* in human life involves not only an ontological issue but also an existential and soteriological one" (131).

The dialogue between Zen philosophy and Western thought, therefore, requires not simply continued reflection on the level of comparative ontology, but also a step back to the experiences of Being and Nothingness that underlie their ontologies. By taking a fresh look at their ordinary experiences and searching for new philosophical methods and vocabularies to articulate them, these traditions will surely discover new possibilities for dialogue between East Asian and Western ways of experiencing and bringing to language what must ultimately remain a mystery. . .

Absolute Nothingness:Wondrous Being:: *Mu:U.*