

# Masao Abe on Zen and Western Thought

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IN THE SECOND half of the twentieth century the Japanese thinker most responsible for building bridges between Zen Buddhism and Western thought has, without question, been Masao Abe. It was my good fortune to have attended a two-year discussion group at Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania led by Professor Abe on the Kyoto School of philosophy and its implications for comparative and cross-cultural thought, East and West. I came away from that experience with a deep sense of indebtedness to Abe *sensei*, not only for the intellectual feast he laid before us, but also for his openness to each of us participants, no matter what our sophistication or lack thereof on the subjects under discussion. His personal magnanimity and gentle humor were matched only by the seriousness and thoughtfulness with which he responded to each of our questions, doubts or criticisms. As a teacher he was the embodiment of intellectual integrity, personal warmth, and spiritual life-wisdom.

It is a privilege, therefore, to enter into this discussion with Professor Abe. In exercise of this responsibility I shall try in what follows to raise the best critical questions I can of Masao Abe's most recent book, *Zen and Western Thought*, a book reflective of the discussions we had at Haverford College. The reader should understand that I do this not because I think any the less of Professor Abe's philosophical achievement, but on the contrary, because I respect it so highly and have been stimulated by it so greatly. In our colloquium Professor Abe continually invited us to do our best in critically examining and responding to the issues under discussion. It follows that when it comes to a discussion of his own work, he would not have us do any less. It is only by taking such philosophical work as that of Masao Abe with the utmost seriousness and entering into the most strenuous critical dialogue

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with it that this late-twentieth century project of constructive global philosophy, for which Masao Abe above all has shown the way, can go forward. This too I learned from Abe *sensei*.

Masao Abe's book, *Zen and Western Thought*, represents the mature fruits of his decades-long effort at cross-cultural bridge-building. In this book he enters into a profound dialogue with Western philosophy and theology from the standpoint of a Zen philosophy. In attempting to respond to Professor Abe's Zen thought from a Western standpoint, I shall raise a number of questions about his approach to and carrying out of this dialogue, drawing in part on Heidegger's thought to do so. In the present essay I shall consider several second-order or meta-issues in Abe's understanding of and approach to this dialogue. In a subsequent essay, I shall consider some of the first-order details of the way he carries out his dialogue and conclude with some suggestions of my own.

### Part One: Second Order Issues

The fundamental second-order question about Abe's project is: *What is Abe's understanding of the nature of philosophical and inter-religious dialogue in general, and East-West, Buddhist-Christian dialogue in particular?*

To begin with, Abe makes it very clear that productive dialogue can only proceed on the basis of a prior understanding of the *irreducible differences* between various philosophical and religious ways of thinking. Such differences, says Abe, are "not of degree or extent but rather of quality and structure" (152). They are "systematic" (xxi), "structural" (xxii, 152, 170), and "deeply rooted" (152). [All references are to the 1985 cloth edition of Abe's book published by the University of Hawaii Press. A paperback edition has just appeared.]

This general assertion of irreducible differences between Zen and Western thought leads to the specific second-order questions I would like to address to Abe's project:

(1) If these ways of thinking are irreducibly different, *comparison* between them might be possible by way of pointing out their differences, for example, but on what presumably *common* basis would a positive, constructive *dialogue* proceed?

(2) Is dialogue limited to pointing out and *describing* these dif-

ferences—as different answers, say, grounded in alternative sets of presuppositions and categories, to common human problems? Or does dialogue also consist in the *evaluative* or *normative* task of assessing which way of thinking is in one or more respects superior or inferior? If the latter, by what *criteria* and from whose *standpoint* are such comparative or dialogical claims to be made?

(3) Why, in particular, does Abe privilege the philosophy of Zen Buddhism and how, without falling into inconsistency, does he nevertheless argue that, despite their irreducible differences, it is the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity above all that is especially well-suited for providing a spiritual framework for our emerging global civilization?

(4) Is Abe's model of dialogue, which draws on the terminology and structure of Western philosophy, appropriate to the Zen position he represents? Is the Western model of philosophical discussion as an encounter between irreducibly different systems of thought appropriate as a model for understanding inter-religious encounter? While such a model might be appropriate for an intra-Western philosophical dialogue, is it not surrendering too much to Western modes of thought for an Asian thinker to adopt such a model?

## I

Abe is not unaware of these questions and responds quite explicitly to most of them. For example, with regard to our first question: "On what basis can dialogue between systematically different structures of thought proceed?" Abe suggests two possible answers. First, despite the radical differences between the Zen concept of Nothingness and the Christian concept of God as Being, Abe cautions against a simplistic reduction of either tradition to these categories, since that would indeed eliminate the possibility of any correspondence between them (192). He seems to be suggesting the possibility of a more complex, perhaps dialectical relationship that would allow for dialogue between the two traditions.

Second, Abe also speaks of 'Being', 'Nothingness' and a third category, the 'Ought' (represented by Kant's philosophy) as "the three possible *answers* to the essential possibilities of human existence" (87). He thus seems to be suggesting that, despite their irreducible dif-

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ferences as basic categories of thought, Being, Nothingness and the Ought may nonetheless be conceived as different answers to the same question. Insofar as they share a common concern for human salvation, they may be seen as different solutions to the same fundamental problems of human existence (31).

Abe's answer to our first question, therefore, appears to be that despite differences in fundamental metaphysical beliefs, different systems of religious thought can enter into positive dialogue because of (1) shared concern for the presumably common predicament of human existence and (2) the possibility of complex logical or dialectical relationships between these fundamental metaphysical concepts themselves.

That a problem appears to remain, however, may be seen in Abe's equally firm insistence not only that Asian and Western categories of 'Being', 'Nothingness', and 'Ought' are, as "transcendental and absolute", irreducible to one another, but that, in the central and decisive case of Buddhism's idea of "absolute Nothingness", there is no Western counterpart at all (124). No matter how complex the dialectic among them, and despite the fact that each constitutes an answer to the same existential problematic, it would seem that, in the final analysis, while there is room for *comparison*, a common basis for *dialogue* is lacking.

## II

To decide whether Abe has adequately answered this problem, therefore, we need to look at his answer to our second question: "Is dialogue a matter simply of describing and comparing differences, or does it also involve evaluating which way of thinking is superior? If the latter, from whose standpoint and by what criteria are such normative claims to be made?"

Abe clearly views Buddhist categories of analysis and Zen's answer to the problem of human existence not simply as different but as valid alternatives to Western philosophical and religious ones. In itself this claim is not necessarily problematic. But does he agree with his editor, William LaFleur, when the latter observes that Abe not only sheds light on "neglected assumptions and presuppositions" of the Western tradition, but also discloses "a certain blind spot in Western ontology

that stretches from Plato to Whitehead", such that, from a Buddhist perspective at least, it can only be concluded that "much of Western thought . . . consistent with its own original assumption, appears . . . philosophically askew" (xvi)?

Abe seems to be of two minds on this issue. On the one hand, he seems not to agree with this normative claim. For example, he expresses serious reservations about the adequacy of Zen's answers and the urgent need for Buddhists to listen to and learn from the West. In one essay based on a lecture in which Christians were present as interlocutors, Abe more than once insists that his stress on the differences of Buddhism and Christianity is not meant as a "rejection or exclusion of Christianity from a Zen point of view, or as a presumption of the superiority of Zen to Christianity" (186). Again: "My emphasis on difference does not intend to judge which one is better" (202). To point out differences, to present alternative answers, even to raise critical questions and pose intellectual challenges to traditions other than one's own, is not necessarily to imply a negative evaluation of that other tradition nor the superiority of one's own. It is to issue an invitation, as best one can, from one's own perspective, to further dialogue, as Abe puts it, "beyond the essential differences" (*ibid.*). Critical questioning of the other's tradition "will not destroy but rather deepen" that tradition (*ibid.*). Further, Abe is quite willing to admit that his criticisms of Christianity from a Zen point of view may themselves be based on an understanding of Christianity (or Western thought generally) that is "insufficient and limited." Thus he invites correction in return, his own analyses being "completely open to your criticism" (186).

Elsewhere, however, Abe seems to speak as an apologist on behalf of Zen's answers to the human condition. He reminds us, quite properly, that parties engaged in dialogue can only approach and enter into that dialogue from the standpoint of their respective traditions. He explicitly acknowledges that one of his commitments is "to promoting a dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism from *the side of Buddhism*" (172, italics mine). As we have seen, it is not easy to pursue such dialogue—in Abe's term, to "bridge" the two—"unless the structural differences in their systems are somehow overcome" (168). Here Abe draws our attention to a new and added requirement for the possibility of dialogue. It is not enough to cite shared existential con-

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cerns or a possible dialectic between fundamental concepts. These efforts themselves must proceed from some particular first-order standpoint, some specific presuppositions, of one tradition or the other. In short, there are only two ways of "overcoming" or "bridging" the systematic, structural differences between two systems of thought, and that, however paradoxical it may sound, is by proceeding *from one side or the other*. It cannot be done from some third, allegedly universal or neutral standpoint external or common to both.

This new requirement in turn raises a new problem, however. Approaching the task of bridge-building from one side or the other would seem to entail that the resulting judgments will not be merely descriptive but will convey normative implications as well. For reference to a "point of view" is also a way of referring to certain *criteria* or *standards* of comparison and judgment. As Abe goes on to say: "I have tried to clarify the differences of the thought structures of the two systems *by using the conceptions of Mahayana Buddhism as the standard and by trying to see how closely Whitehead's philosophy approaches Mahayana Buddhism*" (169; italics mine). What matters here, however, is that while Abe freely admits to doing his work of bridge-building "from the side of Buddhism", he is also quite willing, and in fact expects, that Christians (or Western thinkers) would approach such a conversation and issue critical judgments similarly from their point of view, using their criteria and standards. Thus, Abe continues, "I do not, of course, exclude the opposite approach of using [a given Western] philosophy as the standard and then taking a look as to how close Mahayana Buddhism comes to it" (*ibid.*). Indeed, he notes that Tillich, in his book on Christianity's encounter with other world religions, which includes a chapter on Christian-Buddhist conversation, similarly employs "Christian criteria for judging Christianity and religion in general" (185).

Having noted this, however, it should be pointed out that Abe's project of using the conceptions of one side as the standard or criteria for describing and assessing the other side involves, of necessity, judging how each side does in answering a common set of questions not by a set of criteria, possibly universal in nature but in any case *common to each*, but by criteria specific only to *one* of the parties to the dialogue. For Abe that means, specifically, judging the adequacy of the other tradition's answers by how nearly they approximate one's own ("by try-

ing to see how closely Whitehead's philosophy approaches Mahayana Buddhism"). To the extent that the other tradition does not approximate the Zen answer, to that extent it perhaps needs to engage in a fundamental re-examination of its basic assumptions and presuppositions. (As we shall see, Abe nowhere suggests that to the extent Western answers do not approach the Zen answer, to that extent the Zen tradition's fundamental categories and criteria need to be re-examined. He does say that Zen needs to learn from the West's answers, but that is a different matter, and as we shall see, one quite consistent with maintaining that the fundamental categories of the Zen tradition need not be brought into question as a result of such dialogue).

The problem this poses for Abe's effort (what I referred to earlier as his appearing to be of "two minds" about the matter) is that there seems to be a logical inconsistency between maintaining, on the one hand, that one is not engaged in judging which system is better or superior, while on the other hand noting that all of one's judgments are being made from the standpoint of one's own tradition, in particular with reference to the question how closely that other tradition's answers approximate one's own (presumably normative) answers. Is this a serious inconsistency in his project, or is it simply an expression of the fact that these are, despite the systematic intent of the collection, occasional pieces written over an eighteen year span of time? Can we find an underlying rationale for what on the surface seems an effort that proceeds in two different directions at once? Or does this point to an unavoidable but instructive and not necessarily fatal "circularity" in any such second-order project of philosophical or inter-religious dialogue? Clearly this is an issue we must examine in more detail.

Abe does in fact make normative claims about the superiority of Zen philosophy to Western thought on the basis of the irreducible difference between the Buddhist category of absolute Nothingness and Western notions of Being and God. What, and of what sort, are some of these claims that Abe makes "from the Buddhist side"?

In Abe's view surely the fundamental difference, and the basis for such normative claims as he makes, has to do with the respective Zen and Western perspectives on the phenomenon of "Nothingness" and its significance for their respective understandings of the nature of "Being". We have already noted that, on the one hand, Abe thinks it is an "oversimplification" to say that "Zen is based on Nothingness, while

Christianity is based on God as Being" (192), and yet he also argues that the understanding of Nothingness as the ultimate metaphysical principle has no counterpart in the West. Abe supports this latter claim with the observation that there is an essentially different *experience*, and hence understanding, of the *negativity* of beings, including *human existence*, in the East than in the West (109): "The *negativity* of human-life is felt more seriously and deeply in Buddhism than among the followers of Western intellectual traditions" (130). The corresponding concept of nothingness (Japanese: *mu*) is therefore not taken as a basic (that is, *positive*) metaphysical principle in the West but is rather always viewed as "a secondary, negative" principle (99).

In the East, by contrast, the negativity of beings, and human being, and the corresponding ontological principle of 'Nothingness' are "not considered inferior but equal to positivity" (130). From this perspective, Zen is forced to ask Western thought to provide an ontological justification for the alleged priority of Being over Nothingness, and this, in Abe's view, the West has singularly failed to do, thus exposing, as LaFleur had said, "a certain blindspot in Western ontology that stretches from Plato to Whitehead" (xvi). Not only has the West not done so, from the Zen point of view it is unable, indeed impossible for it to provide such a justification: "The priority of (u) being over (*mu*) non-being is not *ontologically* justifiable with regard to things in general and humans in particular. This is the position held by Buddhism" (109). It is not only not justified, it is not justifiable. Abe is not just making a descriptive observation, he is making a normative claim. Measured by Buddhist standards, the Western ascription of ontological priority to Being over Nothingness is philosophically unjustifiable.

On the basis of his claim that the Buddhist ontological principle of 'Nothingness' is philosophically preferable to the Western principle of the ontological priority of 'Being', Abe proceeds to draw three further normative conclusions concerning specific Western philosophical and theological discussions of Being and God:

(1) First, as regards Western metaphysical discussions, this critique applies not only to Plato and Whitehead, as we have already seen, but to Aristotle, Spinoza, and even such "deconstructionists" of the Western tradition of thinking about 'Being' as Nietzsche and Heidegger. The basic problem in all of these thinkers is that when the ultimate



is understood as 'Being' rather than 'Nothingness', the ultimate is "still somewhat objectified", "not completely free from duality" (primarily, the duality of 'subject-object'), and thus is in fact "founded on an unconsciously posited, hidden, last presupposition. Is not priority finally given to the positive pole of every duality?" (180). For example, when he is contrasted to Dōgen, we see that even Spinoza is not free of the duality between 'God' and 'World', in which "the former has priority" (38-39). Again, though historically Nagarjuna was unaware of Aristotle's doctrine of Being, nevertheless essentially Nagarjuna's doctrine of Emptiness (Nothingness) "transcended Aristotelian 'Being' . . . Mahayana Buddhism's standpoint . . . is established by radically overthrowing 'Being' in the Aristotelian sense" (108). In fact (drawing not only on Buddhism but on Nietzsche?), Abe contends that "Aristotelian Being would seem to have been a fabrication projected by a human mind unable to endure actuality, in which being and non-being are mutually negating" (110). Even Nietzsche is not spared, however, insofar as his appeal to the will-to-power as a positive metaphysical doctrine rests on the familiar Western tendency to "objectify" even our value-constructs. The "will-to-power" is posited on an ontological ground (139-140). Whitehead's process doctrine of God, on the other hand, is also criticized as "not quite compatible with the Buddhist idea of dependent co-origination" (a term synonymous in Abe's usage with Emptiness or Nothingness). By making God a non-temporal principle of limitation for the interpretation of everything in the temporal world, Whitehead makes God "*somewhat* beyond", so that Whitehead, unlike Buddhism, is unable to say "there is *absolutely nothing* behind" the interdependence of things in the temporal universe (158-159).

This brings us to what is, for me, the most interesting dialogue in Abe's book and, for the purposes of this essay, the most pivotal, namely the case of Heidegger. For Abe, too, Heidegger seems to be the most important case because, in Abe's view, Heidegger even more than Whitehead comes closest to the Buddhist way of thinking about 'Nothingness'. And yet even Heidegger is brought into question for not having quite made it all the way over the bridge into the ontological precinct of Buddhist 'nothingness': "Heidegger, like Nietzsche, indeed, more radically than Nietzsche, focussed upon the problem of 'nothingness' and thereby opened up a standpoint extremely close to

Zen" (119). And yet it would seem, says Abe, that even Heidegger did not, in the final analysis, depart from 'thinking about Being' (*Seinsdenken*). His effort was designed "to open up a new path of thinking following the traditional course of Western metaphysics . . . and to make the forgotten 'Being' present itself truly as 'Being' as such" (ibid.). This effort still rests on distinguishing between 'Being' and 'beings', what Heidegger labels the 'ontological difference'. But the Zen Buddhist doctrine of 'Nothingness' (seen in Dogen's "All beings are the Buddha-nature") can never be truly understood until even this Heideggerian idea of the ontological difference is itself "overcome" (48). Heidegger's ontology of 'nothingness' therefore "does not necessarily lead him to the completely dehomocentric, cosmological [i.e. Zen] dimension alone in which the impermanence of all beings in the universe is fully realized" (67).

Abe concludes his review of this series of Western examples of the priority of Being with the final judgment that "the Western mode of thinking can never do away with this eternal dilemma", the dilemma of "subject and object, self and world, being and non-being". Only with Zen do we find a point of view in which "all these are swept aside as something veiling our insight into the nature of life and reality" (73). Clearly, as Abe's comment indicates, in the context of dialogue, and from the Buddhist side, this judgment is not simply a description or even an evaluation of conceptual or ontological differences, but a normative assessment carrying existential and soteriological implications as well.

(2) Second, as regards Christian theological doctrine, Abe's analysis applies to the traditional theistic concept of God, which he sees as closely linked to the traditional Western doctrine of the ontological priority of Being over Non-being. As we have seen, even contemporary revisionist (e.g. process) doctrines of God, such as Whitehead's, are not immune from Abe's radical and thoroughgoing Zen critique. Abe acknowledges that, in one sense, "the Christian idea of God is certainly beyond the duality of subject and object, transcendence and immanence, being and non-being" (74). But while it may not be dualistic in the ordinary sense, it is when compared to Zen 'Emptiness' or 'Nothingness' (75). From the Zen perspective, a dualism remains in this Christian doctrine, a "hidden and final dualism" between God and Creation, which leaves unanswered the question of "the very

origin before duality takes place" (74), what Abe calls elsewhere the "ground" from which even God, as different from Creation, must be seen to emerge (189). But this question, the overcoming of this duality, by reference back to an even more original ground than 'God', is one which Christian theology fails to address. Hence Christian theology, with its personal relation to a personal God of creation, represents, from the Buddhist standpoint, a doctrine which "must be thoroughly overcome for us to attain a complete liberation" (74; cf. 31).

(3) Third, from a Zen perspective one cannot try to solve this question by simply appealing to the divine aseity. Ontologically, Zen's critique of the Christian doctrine of God may be expressed in the form of the following question: "How is God's self-existence possible? What is the *ground* of God's self-existence?" (188-189; cf. 202). "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" (189). The idea of "a self-sustaining God" which is, as it were, the ground of its own self-existence, is not only unjustifiable, it is, even worse, simply unintelligible on Buddhist grounds. It is the very notion of 'Being' (including the ontological priority of Being as 'self-existence', *svabhava*) that is here being radically called into question. It is in fact "overcome" by the Buddhist doctrine of the ultimacy of absolute Nothingness, the view, already advanced by the Buddha against the traditional Upanishadic view of Brahman, that "everything without exception is transitory and perishable, nothing being unchangeable and eternal" (189). Thus Zen not only can but must raise the question, to both Christian theology and Western metaphysics alike: "what is the ground of God's self-existence? how can the priority of Being be ontologically justified?" Clearly implied, from the Buddhist point of view, is not only the inadequacy but the impossibility of any answer from the side of the West to these questions.

As noted above, despite this radical critique of Western metaphysics and theology, Abe does indicate the need for Zen to learn from Western thought. Yet this need does not reach down to the essentials. In part but not wholly this follows, as we have seen, from Abe's view of dialogue as a conversation in which each side measures the other by means of its own distinctive criteria with a view to determining how closely the other can be seen as approximating, or failing to approx-

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imate, the fundamental insights and concepts of one's own tradition. Hence Abe's acknowledgment of openness to and need for criticism from others, especially when the conceptions of those others are radically different from one's own, is carefully formulated in a way calculated not to disturb or challenge anything in the fundamentals of one's own tradition. Dialogue leads not only to "mutual understanding" but also encourages each tradition to seek "further inner development of themselves" (186). But for Abe, while as a result of this dialogue Western thought may be "forced to a basic re-examination" of its fundamental metaphysical categories and presuppositions, Zen is asked only to "internally embrace the standpoints of Western 'Being' and 'Ought' which have been foreign to itself" (120). In so doing it may "grasp again and renew its own standpoint of 'Nothingness'" so as to be able to actualize it "in the present moment of historical time"—but without changing anything in its essentials (*ibid.*).

What I am suggesting, in concluding this section on Abe's normative approach to dialogue, is that while there is nothing exceptionable and indeed much that is laudable in the notion that one of the positive outcomes of dialogue might be the "internal embracing" of ideas previously viewed as "foreign" and as a consequence the further "inner development" of one's tradition so as to enable it to respond to the new situation of global dialogue, it does seem that, while granting Abe is approaching this dialogue "from the Buddhist side", nonetheless the burden of the fundamental ontological critique is decidedly one-way. Whereas Western thought, whether metaphysical or theological, is being asked to consider whether its fundamental ontological categories ('Being', 'God') are not only inadequate but ultimately unjustifiable (forced to "basic re-examination"), the fundamental ontological category of Zen thought ('Nothingness') is never seriously challenged, let alone called into fundamental question, by anything Western philosophy or theology has to say. Rather it seems simply to be assumed that the category of 'Nothingness' will be able somehow (dialectically?) to "internally embrace" these "foreign" categories which are nevertheless also said to be "irreducible" to one another. (Abe's position here reads like an interesting reversal of Tillich's similar-sounding claim that 'Being' "embraces" both itself and 'Non-Being'—a claim which, not surprisingly, Abe rejects—"from the Buddhist side".)

We need to ask, therefore, whether there is a possibility of another

approach to the conversation between Zen and Western thought, one that would call for a radical rethinking of Abe's Kyoto-school-inspired Zen philosophy of 'Nothingness' as well, and not just of the Western thinking involved in this dialogue. If so, perhaps it will enable us to ask in turn, as Abe in a way invites us to do, where, measured by Western standards, does Zen thought come close to, or fall short of, the fundamental insights of Western thought, and thus prove inadequate, perhaps even unjustifiable or unintelligible?

We might also explore the further possibility that perhaps these are not even the right questions to be asking in such a dialogue, whatever one's perspective. Is there a different approach to dialogue, one suggested by Heidegger and other contemporary Western thinkers, where different sorts of questions and different sorts of assessments would be in order instead?

### III

There is another set of assumptions, not so explicitly stated but perhaps for that reason all the more powerfully at work, underlying Abe's second-order approach to and call for dialogue between Zen and Western thought. These have to do with one of his announced goals for such dialogue: that it provide "a spiritual foundation for future humanity in a global age" (xxiii). This general wish is not accidentally related to his conviction that, in particular, "a comparative and dialogical study of Buddhism and Western thought, Christianity included, is absolutely necessary" for providing such a foundation (ibid.). What are the ontological assumptions underlying this vision of "the new spiritual horizon which future humanity requires," and why in particular is it the philosophy of Zen Buddhism and the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity that is especially well-suited for achieving this new spiritual foundation? What is required for an ontology to have global or universal validity, and why are Buddhism and Christianity, among all the "world" religions, best suited, in Abe's judgment, to realize such an ontology? These questions may be taken separately, but, as just suggested, there may also be an inner connection between them.

As an initial point of clarification, what does Abe have in mind when he talks of a spiritual "horizon", "foundation", or ontology that can

provide the basis for a "unified world" or "global age"? In common with other members of the so-called "Kyoto School" he has in mind to construct, through a "creative synthesis between Western thought and the Mahayana tradition" (LaFleur, xii), a new global or "world" philosophy, that is, a philosophy capable of bridging and drawing together on a common spiritual and ontological foundation "East" and "West". This project is much more ambitious than what one usually thinks of as "comparative philosophy, East and West". Comparative philosophy does not necessarily envision or lead to such an all-embracing spiritual goal. The kind of "comparative and dialogical" encounter Abe has in mind, on the other hand, does have this constructive, global ambition.

In Abe's case, this global effort seems to proceed on the basis of at least three presuppositions: (1) that there is a position-transcending position from which we can properly evaluate all other positions; (2) that Buddhism and Christianity represent the closest historical approximations to this transcendent (or transcendental) "positionless position" in East and West respectively; (3) that Buddhism and Christianity, insofar as they differ, represent irreducible but not incompatible differences, that is, they represent a fundamental polarity in the typology of world-historical religions—a polarity between the basic ontological categories or "positions" of 'Being' and 'Ought' (Western), on the one hand, and 'Nothingness' (Asian), on the other—so that between them they cover and exhaust the field of the fundamental spiritual and ontological possibilities of philosophy and religion.

(1) The first presupposition already provides the basis for an answer to our first question. What makes the goal of a spiritual horizon for a unified world possible is the presupposition that there is such a position-transcending ontological position as the one indicated above, a position which Abe believes to have been historically actualized in Zen Buddhism in particular. The Buddhist position, founded on an ontology of absolute 'Nothingness', "is a 'positionless position' in the sense that, being itself empty, it lets every other position stand and work just as it is" (210). It does not evaluate those other philosophies or religions as "false", rather it recognizes "the relative truth" they contain. It is on the basis of this Buddhist acknowledgment and affirmation of the relative truth of other positions that the possibility of "productive dialogue and cooperation" is affirmed (*ibid.*). The ontological

category of 'Absolute Nothingness', in short, "may provide a spiritual foundation for the formation of the rapidly approaching One World in which the co-existence of a variety of contrasting value systems, ways of life, and ways of thinking will be indispensable" (ibid.).

It should be noted, however, that there are limits to this second-order strategy of affirming the relative truth of other traditions. Should a particular tradition resist the relativizing of its first-order truth-claims, it would be subject to the judgment of being either "false" or, worse, "illusory". "In Buddhism, mutual relativity or inter-dependency is the ultimate truth, and doctrines of absolute truth which exclude other views of truth as false are similarly considered illusory" (209). Clearly, there is a second-order ontological criterion here. Only certain ways of thinking about the truth of one's own tradition or of other traditions will pass the test.

Given the assumption of a "positionless position" that relativizes the absolute truth-claims of all other positions and that does not consider its own doctrine of "Absolute Nothingness" as a "position" in its own right (for Abe it is viewed rather as a Zen "deconstruction" of all other temptations to absolute claims of truth, including Buddhist ones as well—here he refers to the example of Nagarjuna), Abe can then without any inconsistency in his own mind claim "on the basis of such a metaphysical standpoint, to bring under one purview the philosophical thought of the West and East, representing the latter by Buddhist thought in particular" (85). (Abe refers to this standpoint which transcends the opposition between various first-order metaphysical positions—e.g., empiricism versus idealism—as "a *metaphysical* standpoint in the best sense of the word"; ibid.). This "positionless position", this metaphysics-transcending meta-metaphysics or doctrine of absolute 'Emptiness', points to "the ultimate which is beyond the opposition between positive and negative [and which] is realized in the East in terms of negativity and in the West in terms of positivity" (133).

Consistent with his claim that the Zen doctrine of absolute Nothingness is not itself a specific first-order doctrine but rather a meta-doctrine, a transcendental perspective on all first-order doctrines, he concludes that his goal of a unified, global spiritual horizon "does not imply a monolithic religion common to East and West, but rather

calls for a dynamic structure capable of freely assuming any form, oriental or occidental, according to the area in which it develops and yet without being confined by any limitation of that area" (270).

The obvious question we must ask, from a Western perspective made sensitive to such notions as the "hermeneutical circle" and the "theory-laden" nature of all discourse, is whether such a clear distinction between second-order meta-statements and first-order doctrinal statements is in fact possible. If not, is Abe's second-order, allegedly "positionless position" not itself inevitably implicated in and in fact derived from a first-order "position" as well—albeit "a *metaphysical* standpoint in the best sense of the word". If so, what does this do to his announced goal of achieving, through dialogue between or among different positions, a spiritual horizon common to them all? If we remove the ontological presupposition of a second-order "positionless position" (a Kyoto-school non-substantialist variation of Fritjof Schuon, S. H. Nasr, and Huston Smith's "transcendental unity of all religions"), if we insist, as followers of Heidegger and Gadamer, that all such second-order proposals are themselves hermeneutical reflections of different first-order positions, then on what other basis can Abe's wished-for productive dialogue proceed? I shall, for the moment, leave an alternative Heideggerian-inspired answer to Abe's proposal for the fourth section of this paper.

(2) In the meantime, let us return to our second question above: Why does Abe view Buddhist-Christian dialogue in particular as uniquely privileged for bringing about the sort of global spiritual horizon he has in view? Here we turn to the other two presuppositions mentioned above: that Buddhism and Christianity represent the closest world-historical approximations to this spiritual vision, and that between them they exhaust the fundamental ontological polarities that make up the content of such a horizon.

As to the first point, Abe seems to presuppose a quasi-Hegelian or spiritual-developmental view of the history of religions, advancing from an earlier stage of 'nature' or 'primitive' religions (he gives no examples, but presumably this would include traditional African or Native American religions), to an intermediate stage of 'ethnic' or 'national' religions (his examples: Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism), and finally reaching the highest stage of the great 'world' or



'universal' religions (examples: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam), which represent "the most advanced stage of human consciousness" (265; the discussion occurs in ch. 16, esp. pp. 261–265).

It is easy to see, therefore, why Christianity and Buddhism, as religions which, according to Abe, are already universal in their inner "structures" or soteriological content (in their "inner essences", as compared to nature- or ethnic-based religions, these religions seek the universal salvation of all persons based simply on their humanity as individuals) are also those which, despite their 'occidental' or 'oriental' origins, are best qualified to articulate a new, truly global spiritual horizon through dialogue. The outcome of their dialogue is that they will thereby become universal in their "outer" or cultural forms as well (266, 268). Through dialogue there will arise "an oriental form of Christianity" as well as "an occidental form of Buddhism". These will be "the concrete forms taken by the two religions when they become truly universal world religions", that is, "*universal forms of world religion* (268–269). (Abe does not pursue the case of Islam, apparently because he is less familiar with it than with Christianity and Buddhism; 265)

I have already indicated a major difficulty in accepting Abe's first presupposition concerning the nature of a new spiritual horizon for a global humanity, namely, the impossibility of establishing, in a non-circular manner, a second-order ontological foundation that is theory-neutral as to all first-order participants in such a global conversation. The consequences of that impossibility, when disregarded, are made even clearer when we now see its implications for Abe's reading of the possible contribution of specific first-order traditions such as Judaism or Hinduism to inter-religious dialogue. They would appear to be disqualified from participating in the co-shaping of that future universal spiritual horizon because of their irreducible particularity, not in cultural form but, more damagingly, in their very spiritual essence ("structure").

We need to ask, therefore, how a theory of the quasi-historical development of the essential structures (and cultural forms) of religious consciousness, grounded in a theory of a corresponding development in the stages of human consciousness from lowest or most "primitive" to highest or most universal, a theory motivated, as we have seen, by a specific spiritual and ontological agenda, is to be

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justified—whether historically, philosophically or, most importantly for Abe's project, religiously or spiritually. Particularly for a late twentieth century Western thinker, especially one speaking out of a Christian background, the absolute and not merely relative spiritual validity of Judaism, in both form and structure, has to be affirmed over against any theory, no matter how well-meaning or sincerely-motivated, that appears to relegate it (along with other, for example, Native American religious traditions) to second or third rank in an otherwise laudable effort to shape, through dialogue, a new spiritual horizon for humanity's future.

(3) Finally, Abe has an additional reason, beyond the alleged superiority of Buddhism and Christianity as 'world' or 'universal' religions, to give them a privileged position in the effort to shape the future spiritual horizon of humanity. According to Abe, Buddhism and Christianity between them represent the two polar tendencies that together embrace the essential dimensions of spiritual life—the *ontological*, represented by the Zen doctrine of absolute 'Nothingness', and the *axiological*, represented by the Christian doctrine of God as a personal and moral being, 'Being' as 'Ought'. (One thinks here of John Cobb's argument in his book, *Beyond Dialogue*, that there are not one but two religious "ultimates", represented by the Buddhist view of ultimate reality as 'Emptiness' and the Christian view of God as a Personal, Moral Reality.) Abe's distinction is an interesting one, and while not, I believe, ultimately defensible, it does shed light on a question that has troubled us above. Given that Abe is relatively critical of the very foundations of Christianity from a Zen point of view, how can he also maintain, without falling into internal inconsistency, that nevertheless Zen is in certain respects profoundly in need of something from Christianity? The answer lies in his account of the polar relation of the two traditions.

On the very last pages of his book, Abe speaks of the importance, in the effort to create more universal and globally valid forms of their respective religious traditions, for Christianity to incorporate the "mystical" or "maternal, receptive" *oriental* aspect of Buddhism into the forms of its religious life and ways of thinking, and for Buddhism, likewise, to incorporate "the paternal and justice-oriented" *occidental* aspects of Christianity (274–275). The argument is that each will only achieve a fully satisfactory, universal form as a "world" religion when

the mystical (*oriental*) and justice (*occidental*) poles are harmonized and actualized on each side of the dialogue. Clearly, we need to examine more closely how this polarity is grounded, whether such a harmonization is indeed possible, and on what or whose terms.

We mentioned earlier Abe's belief that "it is an oversimplification to say that Zen is based on Nothingness, while Christianity is based on God as Being, in contrast to non-being" (192). There would be, says Abe, no "correspondence" between them if that were so. But on what basis is there any "correspondence", any positive dialogue, between Buddhism's absolute Nothingness and Christianity's God as Being? Abe now provides us with an answer, spelling out his earlier hint of a dialectical relationship between these two fundamental and otherwise irreducibly different categories.

For Christianity, the concept of God "should not be understood merely ontologically, but also axiologically". Christianity's chief religious concern is with the problem of good and evil, and "this is not simply an ontological issue, but rather an *axiological* issue" (192-192). For Christians, therefore, the most significant point is not the issue of God as 'Being' but God as 'Ought'. In Zen, on the other hand, the central religious issue is the problem of being and non-being. The idea of justice (the 'Ought') is relatively secondary, in fact "rather lacking, or at least very weak" (193).

Abe thus bases his argument on a contrast between "Zen and its ontological understanding of Nothingness [and] Christian faith with its axiological emphasis on God's 'ought'." Yes, Zen is radically critical of Christianity, but on *ontological* grounds. It finds Christianity's doctrine of God *ontologically* unjustifiable. But, says Abe, "Zen's criticism of the Christian view of the one God . . . does not necessarily hit the core of, or do justice to, the essence of Christianity". The core or essence of the Christian concept of God has only secondarily to do with the concept of Being, whereas it has everything to do with the concept of the Ought. Therefore, "the strength of Zen is the weakness of Christianity and vice versa. Based on this recognition of these mutual strengths and weaknesses, we must enter into dialogue" (*ibid.*).

There are several problems with this resolution of the differences in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. First, as Abe himself notes, in both Zen and Christianity "ontological and axiological aspects are inseparably connected" (*ibid.*). The fact that one aspect is, allegedly,

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“more central” to one tradition while the other is “more strongly emphasized” by the other does not mean that therefore one aspect represents the “strength” of one tradition and the “weakness” of the other.

Nor, additionally, does it change the more fundamental fact that, since in each tradition these two aspects are inseparably connected—that is, bear an internal, logical-conceptual (“structural” or “systematic”) connection to one another, one cannot, as it were, lift the axiological (“justice”, “Ought”) aspect out of the Christian context and set it down unaltered within the ontological (“mystical”, “Nothingness”) context of Buddhism, where the quite different concepts of suffering and *karma*, not sin and guilt, are the central axiological or soteriological ones (*ibid.*). Nor, going in the other direction, can one simply import the Buddhist concept of absolute Nothingness into the Christian doctrinal scheme to provide an alternative ontological foundation for distinctively Christian axiology or soteriology. For Abe has already told us that the fundamental metaphysical categories of Nothingness, Being and Ought are irreducibly different. Granted, Abe views these polar dimensions of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue from a Buddhist perspective on the relative truth of other traditions, and from an understanding of dialogue that sees the task of each partner to be open to the possibility of assimilating within its own tradition such insights of its dialogue partner as can be accommodated to and further the “inner development” of one’s own tradition (186). Nevertheless it is still difficult to see how, conceptually, an axiology grounded in a doctrine of God as Being and Ought can be imported into a different doctrinal structure or system of thought based instead on a doctrine of ultimate reality as Nothingness.

On the last page of his book Abe notes, and rejects, the possibility that Christianity and Buddhism are “perhaps too old for such a transformation” (275). I would agree with him that the story of the possible mutually transformative effects of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, far from being over, is, thanks to the efforts of thinkers like Masao Abe, just beginning. But the problem is not the “age” of the traditions. It is a question of the logical or systematic possibilities of transformation, given underlying and irreducibly different fundamental categories of thought.

## IV

My last set of questions addressed to the meta-level of Abe's project concern not his choice of Western thought or a particular Western religious tradition (Christianity) as a partner in dialogue, but his use (in common with the leading proponents of the Kyoto school) of Western philosophy—that is, Western philosophical terminology and the Western notion of philosophy itself as involving systematic structures of thought—to formulate both the terms and the very structure of that dialogue. Here I wish to raise the following question:

(1) First, there are linguistic-conceptual or hermeneutic issues posed by the cross-cultural translation or interpretation of philosophical terminology. What are the implications of using Western philosophical vocabulary to help clarify the "essence" of Zen "philosophy"? What are the implications of, as it were, *translating* Buddhist terms into Western philosophical terms, or of trying at least to find "correspondences" between Buddhist and Western terms? What, in general, are the assumptions, and difficulties, underlying the effort to translate philosophical terms across linguistic and cultural borders? Why do we assume it is possible at all? What has to be the case for it to be so? If such translation is not possible without distortion, or at least interpretation, taking place, what does this do to the underlying trans-linguistic, trans-cultural ontology implicit in Abe's effort? What does this mean for the project of cross-cultural dialogue in general?

(2) Second, there are critical-systematic or ontological problems raised by the contemporary Western critique (or "deconstruction") of traditional Western metaphysics and its implications for a similar "deconstruction" of Abe's traditional Western "Zen" reading of Western thought. What does this do to the plausibility of the resulting use of Zen "philosophy" to *critique* the very Western philosophical tradition from which it derives (at least in part) its own critical terminology? Would it be legitimate, for example, to look at the particular metaphysics presupposed in Abe's version of a "Zen" philosophy? What if that particular Western metaphysics has itself been brought into question by more recent Western thinkers?

(3) Finally, to the extent that Abe's second-order assumptions concerning the nature, criteria and goal of dialogue are shaped by a Western

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concept of philosophy as a systematic structure of thought rather than by traditional East Asian modes of inter-religious encounter and thinking, what does this mean for his ability to remain faithful to the Buddhist, specifically Zen, side of the dialogue?

In brief, Abe's effort to enter into dialogue with Western thought by drawing, in part, on Western philosophy, including a certain characterization of what philosophy itself is, may prove to be a two-edged sword that cuts both ways. Abe himself of course recognizes this, is quite frank about it, and openly invites this sort of counter-interrogation in response (186).

(1) I have already raised the question of the "translation" of concepts from one system of thought to another in the discussion of the importing of an axiology of justice from a Christian context into an ontology of Nothingness in a Zen context. Of course, this conceptual problem could occur even when both systems of thought were products of the same philosophical or cultural context (say, European metaphysics). But what happens when the process of translation has take place between not just two different metaphysical systems within the same cultural and philosophical tradition, but between two different systems located in two radically different cultural and philosophical "worlds", the worlds of Europe and East Asia? When the "worlds" are not just different doctrinal schemes but different cultural and linguistic traditions as a whole, what does this do to the enterprise of philosophical translation? Cross-cultural dialogue is not the same as intra-cultural dialogue between thought systems drawing from a common philosophical-cultural heritage. This is not to say that such projects of "translation" and "dialogue" are impossible, but can they be prosecuted in quite the manner Abe's project seems to suppose? That is our question.

To see at least another, more cautious if not contrary perspective on the problematic nature of cross-cultural translation or dialogue in the realm of philosophical thought, we need only recall Heidegger's conversation with a Japanese professor (and translator) of German literature, as presented in his essay, "A Dialogue on Language" [all citations from Heidegger's book, *On The Way To Language*].

Heidegger points to a number of difficulties in a cross-cultural dialogue between East Asian and Western thought:

In the discussion of a Japanese term conducted in a European

language Heidegger observes that:

The languages of the dialogue shifted everything into European. Yet the dialogue tried to *say* the essential nature of *Eastasian* art and poetry. . . . The language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about. (4-5)

Why? Because, says Heidegger:

If man by virtue of his language dwells within the claim and call of Being, then we Europeans presumably dwell in an entirely different house than Eastasian man. Assuming that the languages of the two are not merely different but other in nature, and radically so. And so, a dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible. (5)

Despite this difference Japanese thinkers in the Kyoto School have tried to construct a truly global philosophy by translating Zen Buddhist terms into a conceptuality that might help Western and Asian thinkers alike to better understand the Zen tradition. But, Heidegger asks, do you really need Western philosophical "concepts" to articulate the spiritual experience of Zen? The Japanese professor replies: "Presumably yes, because since the encounter with European thinking, there has come to light a certain incapacity in our language." Heidegger says: "Here you are touching on a controversial question. . . the question whether it is necessary and rightful for Eastasians to chase after the European conceptual systems." (2-3)

The problem Heidegger is raising proceeds on at least two levels. First, are the "languages" in which European and East Asians dwell not just different but radically other? Second, are "concepts", a feature distinctive of Western languages, namely, its conceptual systems, not just unnecessary but seriously inappropriate for expressing what and how it is that the Japanese language *says*?

The language of the dialogue was European; but what was to be experienced and to be thought was the Eastasian nature of Japanese art. Whatever we spoke about was from the start forced over into the sphere of European ideas. (13-14)

Heidegger now goes on to raise an even deeper, more disturbing ques-

tion: "Could it be that the nature of language remains something altogether different for the Eastasian and European peoples"? (23) In other words, it is not just that European and East Asian people dwell in different language worlds, or that the European languages are oriented to concepts whereas East Asian languages may not be, or that there may be a discrepancy between European concepts and an East Asian experience that is searching for appropriate linguistic ways to be said. It is not simply the difficulty of finding the appropriate translation for a particular word or experience. It is that the very nature of "language" itself may be different in these two worlds. Thus Heidegger observes of his own reflections on language that: "This is why I do not yet see whether what I am trying to think of as the nature of language is *also* adequate for the nature of Eastasian language; whether in the end—which would also be a beginning—a nature of language can reach the thinking experience, a nature which would offer the assurance that European-Western saying and Eastasian saying will enter into dialogue such that in it there sings something that wells up from a single source." (8)

Once again, it is not just that Western and Asian languages are different, but that they are other in nature, such that not even a single concept, *language*, can embrace them both. If we can have no assurance that, whatever the differences between our respective languages, at least what we understand language to be is the same, where does this leave the possibility, let alone the prospects, for East-West dialogue of the sort Abe proposes?

Heidegger's answer is a great deal more tentative, perhaps even uncertain, than Abe's:

*"Japanese:* As you may have surmised, I see more clearly as soon as I think in terms of our Japanese experience. But I am not certain whether you have your eye on the same.

*Inquirer:* That could prove itself in our dialogue.

*J:* We Japanese do not think it strange if a dialogue leaves undefined what is really intended, or even restores it back to the keeping of the undefinable.

*I:* That is part, I believe, of every dialogue that has turned out well between thinking beings. As if of its own accord, it can take care that that undefinable something not only does not



slip away, but displays its gathering force ever more luminously in the course of the dialogue.” (12–13)

In other words, for Heidegger too dialogue continues, but how and why it is possible and where it might lead—these are issues that remain to be pondered. Meanwhile there are assumptions to be challenged, dangers to be avoided, and outcomes not to be taken for granted—perhaps even deliberately left unspecified, unspoken.

With this counter-example from Heidegger in mind, let us return to some of Abe’s observations about the terminological differences and difficulties in translating the Zen spiritual experience into a Western philosophical vocabulary—and on that basis, question once again the success or even propriety of any *Zen critique* of Western thought on the basis of a translation thus conceived.

Abe himself is sensitive to this difficulty of finding concepts in Western philosophical vocabulary that even correspond to, let alone adequately translate, the meaning of key Buddhist doctrinal terms. The most fundamental problem of translation, of course, concerns the Japanese terms for ‘Nothingness’ and ‘Being’, *mu* and *u* respectively. Abe explains this partly in terms of the fundamental conceptual bias of the Western metaphysical tradition in favor of “the priority of Being over non-being”, but partly in terms of the underlying, and related, disposition of the Western tradition not to take the fundamental human *experience* of “negativity” as deeply or seriously as it is in the Buddhist tradition. But he provides other examples as well of fundamental terms and/or doctrines which have no exact equivalent in, or are even completely foreign to, Western ideas and/or experience, and hence which cannot be adequately translated due to this lack of correspondence, this absence of common ground in thought or experience.

There are, for example, *ji* and *ri*, translated (that is, interpreted) by Abe as ‘the particular’ (“actual, phenomenal, particular, temporal, and differentiated”) and ‘the universal’ (“ideal, noumenal, universal, eternal, and undifferentiated”) respectively (84). Though the philosophical positions (empiricism, idealism) which try to understand this “opposition and tension” are, Abe says, “common to both East and West”, nevertheless Buddhist and Western thought “differ greatly in their *concrete understanding*” of the phenomena referred to by these

terms (*ibid.*). Thus the *content* of what is referred to by the Japanese term, *ri*, is “radically different” from what the term “universal” means in Western thought. For one thing, it is “mutually nondual with *ji* as the particular” (*ibid.*). But if this is so, one has to ask Abe how it is that the associated philosophical positions (in the West labelled “empiricism” and “idealism”) can in any way whatsoever be regarded as “common” to East and West.

As mentioned above, the most fundamental problem of translation concerns the Japanese terms for ‘Nothingness’ and ‘Being’, *mu* and *u* respectively. They are, along with *ji* and *ri*, “the key terms employed throughout the discussion” (281, n.2). In particular, the concept of ‘Nothingness’ is *the* fundamental term in Abe’s account of the structural difference between Buddhist and Western ways of thinking. What makes of Zen Buddhist philosophy, in John Hick’s words, “a radical alternative” to Western metaphysical assumptions *as a whole* (ix), is that “the ultimate in Zen (and in Buddhism) is neither ‘Being’ nor ‘Ought’, but rather ‘absolute Nothingness’ or ‘Emptiness’, which is dynamically identical with ‘wondrous Being’ or ‘Fullness’ ” (Abe, xxi-xxii).

It is of crucial importance, therefore, for a *dialogue* between Zen Buddhism and Western thought, to be able to *translate* the Japanese term for ‘absolute Nothingness’, *mu*, into a Western philosophical vocabulary that, however different from traditional Western categories of thinking, is nonetheless somehow intelligible in terms that Western thought can understand. To the extent that no equivalent Western terminology can be found, to that extent must the effort at translation founder and the enterprise of dialogue, as Abe understands it, itself be rendered problematic. But a dilemma then arises: to the extent that the translation of Zen Buddhism’s *mu* into the alien language of Western philosophical vocabulary succeeds, the question arises: to what extent has a *reinterpretation*, if not distortion, of *mu* occurred that now renders it, in turn, foreign to what, in the context of its original setting in Japanese religious experience, *mu* really says? Could it be that, as Heidegger points out, “the language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about”, namely, the Japanese Zen experience of *mu*?

That this remains a serious problem for Abe’s enterprise is attested to by several comments Abe himself makes on just these critical terms,

*mu* and *u*. The idea of *mu*, common to Taoism as well as Buddhism, that is, the idea of *nothingness* as ultimate, has “no Western counterpart” (124). The reason is that “*mu*, which stands for English term ‘non-being’, has an important connotation which is different from ‘non-being’ ” (281, n.3). Specifically, “the English equivalents of absolute *Mu*, non-being or nothingness, do not sufficiently carry the original meaning whose logical structure is: absolute negation (the negation of negation) is absolute affirmation” (287, n.7). Abe himself concludes, therefore, that “ I am painfully aware that the English translation ‘Nothingness’ is rather misleading in a Western context” (198). In fact, it is a term whose meaning, in its “absolute” sense, *transcends* the very distinction between ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ itself (198). As a result, it ends up, as we have seen, having a significance that is ‘non-dual’ with ‘wondrous Being’ or ‘Fullness’ (terms which, in a “relative” sense at least, are its apparent “opposites”).

It follows that *u* too, does not mean in Japanese what ‘being’ (or ‘Being’) means in English. For one thing, most nouns in Japan and China, unlike in most European languages, Abe points out, “generally make no distinction between singular and plural. Hence the term *u* can mean *beings*, *being* or *Being itself*” (281–282, n.3). And Abe confesses that in these essays he himself “in most cases, uses the term without differentiating between beings, being and Being itself” (ibid.). In the light of the recent ordeal Heidegger has put us through insisting on the “ontological difference” of “beings” and “Being”, this is an astonishing admission and warns us to be on our guard about subsequent critical comments directed against Heidegger from the standpoint of an *undifferentiated* use of *mu*. (This is not to say that such criticisms may not be merited, but just that we must be exceedingly careful in acceding to such judgments.) Of the term ‘wondrous Being’ itself, *U*, viewed as nondually identical in meaning with ‘absolute Nothingness’, *Mu*, Abe appropriately concludes that “the Buddhist idea of wondrous Being is clearly different from the idea of ‘Being’ understood as ultimate Reality in the West”, the latter being viewed, in Abe’s terms, as “ontologically prior to non-being,” rather than nondually identical with it (130).

Abe seems to suggest, in a manner echoing Heidegger’s observation, that perhaps underlying these radical conceptual differences of East and West is a radically different experience of life in Buddhism than the

one reflected in the Western tradition: "the *negativity* of human life is felt more seriously and deeply in Buddhism than among the followers of Western intellectual traditions" (ibid.). It is viewed as *equal* in significance, not *inferior* to, the "positivity" of existence reflected, on the doctrinal level, in the Western assignment of "ontological priority" to Being over Nothingness (ibid.).

This brings us face to face with the suggestion contained in Heidegger's remarks on the problematic nature of dialogue between Western-European and East-Asian ways of thinking and speaking. For as Abe at one point observes, we have to consider the possibility that in the final analysis the basic terms of Zen Buddhism, especially *mu* and *u*, may, superficial resemblances to the contrary notwithstanding, be terms "which probably cannot be adequately translated into any European language because there is nothing in the Western way of thinking [or experience?] corresponding to them" (284, n.21)

One possible conclusion from these observations, which seems to make the idea of a philosophical dialogue between Zen and Western thought "nearly impossible" (Heidegger), is that the enterprise of clarifying the essence of Mahayana, and especially Zen Buddhism with the help of dialogue with Western philosophy "in order to avoid entanglement in the doctrinal complexity and stereotyped practice of the traditional forms of Buddhism" (xxiii), Abe's other major goal in these essays, perhaps simply cannot be realized, at least not in a European language, and that such an effort will not only run the risk of distorting Zen thought and the Zen tradition itself, but will also mislead Western efforts to understand the Zen experience as well.

(2) Our second question concerned the extent to which Abe's translation project is shaped by reliance upon a particular tradition of Western philosophy and thus open to whatever deconstructive critique that tradition itself has more recently undergone. I shall comment on this issue only briefly here, reserving fuller discussion for the second part of this article. For the present it must suffice simply to raise the question whether, if Abe's project of dialogue with the West succeeds, it is because, already on the side of his Zen "philosophy", the dialogue has been determined by the particular history and nature of "philosophy" in Japan which, prior to the advent of the Kyoto School and still today, has meant *Western* philosophy. In the work of the Kyoto School it has been German philosophy, above all nineteenth century

German Idealism, which has shaped the image of "Western philosophy" in terms of which a "Zen philosophy" is then formulated, It appears to be this tradition of classical German metaphysics upon which Abe draws for the logical or dialectical tools, the ontological vocabulary, and the topics of discussion for his "Zen" critique of Western thought, and which, curiously, shapes even the perspective from which he judges such later critics of the tradition as Nietzsche and Heidegger.

What I am suggesting, as I shall try to document in the second part of this article, is that beneath the surface of the official dialogue between Abe's "Zen philosophy" and "Western thought" there is another, more fundamental philosophical dialogue that has already taken place—a decision made, a verdict rendered—in which the radical implications of Nietzsche's and especially Heidegger's critique of the German metaphysical tradition and behind that of the "onto-theo-logical" (Heidegger's term) tradition of Western philosophy as a whole are, as it were, set aside or not fully considered. But if Abe's critique of Western thought, as well as the formulation of his own Zen philosophy, is shaped by an onto-theo-logical tradition of Western philosophy which has itself been radically challenged by such thinkers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Derrida, must this not raise the question of a further extension of the dialogue between Zen philosophy and Western thought, one that incorporates not only Western efforts to "deconstruct" the Western tradition but also, by implication, a deconstructing of Abe's Zen critique of that tradition to the extent that it relies on that very tradition for its tools, terminology, and issues?

(3) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, given that the very notion, the very meaning, of 'philosophy' in the Japanese setting is primarily Western-style philosophy, an attempt to formulate a "philosophy" of Zen, even prior to dialogue with any particular Western school or thinker, must be highly problematic at the outset, for several reasons:

(i) As Heidegger observes, it inevitably leads to trying to *say* the fundamental Japanese (Zen) experience in a *language* alien to it;

(ii) it draws on a particular *kind* of language to do so, namely, the language of *concepts*, which may be alien to *Zen experience* in particular;

(iii) by seeing Zen as having a "philosophy" in the Western sense,

namely, a structured thought-system, it is forced to construe *dialogue* as a critical conversation, perhaps even a polemic struggle, between competing (“alternative”) systems of thought. But this seems, as earlier indicated, to be a characteristically Western model of dialogue, a model alien to the East-Asian experience of inter-religious encounter (e.g., the *inter-weaving* of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shintoism in Japan). If so, then at this level the “dialogue” is, as it were, over before it starts—and it is not clear that it is the Zen side that comes out the “winner”.

In saying this I do not want to be mistaken. Abe’s effort to show that Zen, too, has a “philosophical basis” beneath the surface of its “non-philosophical” experience or praxis is important in any case, and even more so in this era of global dialogue. But the question that must be kept in mind is: in trying to formulate the “essence” of Zen philosophy in a Western language, particularly in Western metaphysical concepts and in the Western form of a structured system of thought, at what cost to Zen experience and the Zen tradition can this dialogue be pursued, and with what likelihood of arriving at its stated goal?

In summary, I have tried in this first part of my article to examine several second-order issues in Abe’s formulation of a dialogue between Zen philosophy and Western thought. In particular I have raised questions about Abe’s general understanding of: (I) the basis and possibility of such dialogue; (II) the nature and criteria of dialogue; (III) the particular ontology that informs his approach to dialogue, and why this privileges Buddhist-Christian dialogue in particular; and finally, (IV) the critical implications of his attempt to articulate this project in the terminology and structures of Western philosophical thought.

In the second part of this article I shall examine (V) what, from a Heideggerian perspective, would seem to be the traditional Western metaphysical character of Abe’s Zen critique of Western thought; (VI) how, if so, this leaves Abe’s critique open to counter-criticism from recent developments in Western philosophy, especially those drawing on Heidegger; and (VII) some suggestions as to an alternative approach to some of the issues arising out of a dialogue between Zen and Western thought.