

# From Dialogue to Mutual Transformation

## The Third Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter

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ON THE LEADING edge of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is a project initiated in 1984 by the Christian theologian John Cobb, Jr. and the Buddhist thinker Abe Masao. The dialogue was to take the form of an ongoing "Theological Encounter" group that would be composed of representatives of both religions. Participants were sought who were well-versed in the historical and theological traditions of their faiths, as well as interested in the prospect of dialogue. The group would meet once each year for an intensive conference over a four or five year period. Each conference would be oriented around a single theme, and would be based on two papers from the Christian side and two from the Buddhist side that were prepared well in advance and read ahead of time by all participants. Two Buddhists would be asked to respond to each Christian paper, and two Christians to respond to each Buddhist paper. These responses would then be summarized at the conference table, and the papers would then be discussed by the various representatives.

John Cobb and Abe Masao felt that a high a degree of continuity over the multi-year project was advisable, enabling the development of greater trust and intimacy, as a ground for successful dialogue. Consequently, a group of about twenty-four participants was chosen for the multi-year project. These have included people from a wide variety of traditions: Catholic and Protestant from the Christian side and Theravada, Zen, Pure Land and Tibetan Vajrayana from the Buddhist side. The first three meetings have included Christians John Berthrong, David Chappell, Julia Ching, John Cobb, Langdon Gilkey, John Hick, Gordon Kaufman, Hans Kung, David Lochhead, Schubert

Ogden, Rosemary Reuther, David Tracy and Seiichi Yagi and Buddhists Abe Masao, Francis Cook, Rita Gross, Jeffrey Hopkins, David Kalupahana, Miyuki Mokusen, Judith Simmer-Brown, Takeda Ryusei, Tokiwa Gishin, Taitetsu Unno, and myself.

The first meeting of the Encounter group was held at Hawaii Loa College in January 1984 and was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The topic of "suffering" was chosen as an appropriate place to begin our dialogues, since it is universal in human experience and lies at the center of thought of both Buddhism and Christianity. In a report, Francis Cook commented that "much was accomplished at this first meeting and, while the focus was on the topic of suffering, the necessary ancillary discussions of redemption, liberation, enlightenment, grace and so on, went far in preparing the group for the next meeting."<sup>1</sup>

The second meeting was held in late March 1985, at the Vancouver Theological Seminary in Vancouver, British Columbia, under the auspices of the United Church of Canada. The central topic of the second conference moved beyond the first year's discussion of 'the human condition', to the process and goal of "ultimate transformation" in Buddhism and Christianity. Papers were presented by Buddhists Abe Masao (Zen) and Rita Gross (Tibetan Vajrayana) and by Christians Schubert Ogden (Protestant) and David Tracy (Catholic). In summarizing this and the previous years conferences, Cook remarked that

the participants seem to have agreed that both conferences to date have been marked by a remarkable absence of rancor, jealousy, suspicion, and other small emotions which too often overwhelm the best intentions. The atmosphere has been warm, cordial, friendly, open, and this played no small role in supporting the original conception of these dialogues as a process of mutual understanding and enrichment, or what John Cobb has called 'crossing over', as opposed to a stage for confessional statements of belief and some attempt at persuasion."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Cook, "The Second Buddhist Christian Theological Encounter: A Report," *Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Spring 1986), p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

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The third Theological Encounter was held at Purdue University in Purdue, Indiana, again under the auspices of the United Church of Canada. In this third meeting, we moved from the topic of ultimate transformation to that toward which transformation is directed, "ultimate reality," as understood by each tradition. In order to give substance to this report, let me summarize the four papers that formed the basis of responses and discussion. This will be particularly useful because the papers, taken as a group, graphically illustrate the kind of ferment, interchange and creativity that are increasingly coming to characterize the Theological Encounters.

The first paper to be considered was John Cobb's essay, "Ultimate Reality: A Christian View"<sup>3</sup> wherein Cobb explores the notion of "God . . . that one reality truly worthy of trust and worship." Cobb sees a profound difference between this Abrahamic notion and Indian, and particularly Buddhist ways of speaking of the ultimate as "emptiness" or "emptying." This oriental notion, Cobb remarks "does not have the type of otherness to human beings that makes trust and worship the appropriate relation."

Then, making reference to the fruits of previous Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Cobb notes the Buddhist critique of Christian attempts to set God as a being alongside other beings, a critique that has led some to associate the God of the Bible with "Being Itself." Nevertheless, Cobb observes, Being Itself like emptiness cannot elicit our responses of trust and worship. Then Cobb asks, is there any viewpoint from which the Christian ultimate of God as the object of trust and worship makes sense, and can be explicated to the Buddhist? Cobb believes there is, and he proposes to show what this is by considering four kinds of human experience which have been particularly elevated by Christianity as testifying "most immediately to the reality of that which we trust and worship," to the reality of God. These are: truth, righteousness, freedom, and directedness.

By *truth*, Cobb means "not a doubtful inference from some more immediate data, but a shared assumption underlying our agreements and disagreements." This is truth in a final, unsurpassable way. Cobb tells us that he interprets this truth to be God. *Righteousness* is that which is presupposed by a sense of sin, that which gives rise to the "hunger and

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<sup>3</sup> Responded to by Prof. Abe and myself.

thirst after righteousness.” This fundamental righteousness Cobb understands as God.

In a similar way, Cobb means *freedom* in an ultimate sense. He points to fact of a “settled past,” which bounds the present with a web of causal effects. Freedom is that moment of choice, that freedom to transcend the causal effects of the past. This freedom is not the result of the past, but something different. Cobb would call this freedom God. Finally, *directedness* is that sense of wisdom at work within situations that makes some choices preferable to others, even when that preference goes against previous habitual patterns and even values. Moreover, directedness is bound up with our trust in that inherent wisdom. Cobb remarks, “What I trust I call God.” Thus Cobb discusses “ultimate reality” for Christianity by taking features of experience and clarifying their ‘ultimate’—Buddhists might say ‘unconditioned’—dimension.

Cobb then discusses immanence and transcendence in terms of these four categories. He begins by pointing out that Christianity has often emphasized the transcendence of God, an emphasis that Buddhists have sometimes found disturbing. While this emphasis is important and necessary, Cobb tells us that it is not the whole picture but must be balanced by insistence on His immanence. Truth and Righteousness point to the transcendent dimension of God, while Freedom and Directedness point to His immanence. Cobb’s extremely fruitful approach thus takes its inception from experiences that are shared by all humans, although perhaps in different ways and from different perspectives, and leads us to a reformulation of traditional Christian perspectives.

Francis Cook’s paper, “Just This: Buddhist Ultimate Reality,”<sup>4</sup> was the second essay to be discussed. Cook begins by point out the various and paradoxical ways in which Buddhists speak of the ultimate. In the end, he tells us, this diversity and use of paradox enables Buddhism to maintain awareness that language is finally inappropriate to reality: it can suggest it, it can point toward it, but it can never adequately express it. Thus the term “ultimate reality” is a tricky one at best for Buddhists.

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<sup>4</sup> Responded to by Profs. Kung and Yagi.

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With this caveat, Cook then discusses what he considers the most basic Buddhist formulation of "reality" or, in this context, "ultimate reality" namely that of *pratityasamutpada* or conditioned coproduction." What is this doctrine of "conditioned coproduction"? It is the teaching that all presently existing phenomena arise out of causes and conditions. Moreover, all present phenomena in turn contribute toward the future causes and conditions out of which future phenomena will arise. It is this doctrine of "conditioned coproduction" that lies behind the Buddha's famous statement, "This being, that becomes . . .," pointing to the fact that when the causes and conditions that make for bondage to *samsara* have been eliminated, then the truth and freedom of *nirvana* are attained.

For Cook, *pratityasamutpada* functions virtually as a universal within Buddhism. Cook says, "When I search for something that most, perhaps all Buddhists from the primitive Buddhism of the first centuries to the Buddhism of Nishitani Keiji, would accept as ultimate, I am led to *sunyata* and its synonym, *pratityasamutpada*. . . . That is to say, despite significant cultural variations in world Buddhism, all forms would agree that if there is a reality, existence, or being beyond which it is futile to seek, and thus is the end, it would be the world itself as the place where everything exists as the result of everything else in a vast, inconceivable web of mutual conditioning. . . . This is also the world of *karma*, the active world of cause and effect. (This is also Dharma, the way things are in reality, the ultimate truth.)" This is also *dharmakaya* and *nirvana* for many Buddhists. In his paper, Cook struggles with the issue of why some Buddhists tend to focus more explicitly than others on the doctrine of "conditioned coarising," and with the question of the significance of various interpretations among the schools.

In his paper, Cook makes the intriguing point that *dharmakaya* ("absolute body of the Buddha"), which has some resonance with the Christian idea of God, is not to be understood as a transcendent being apart from this world. Rather, it refers to the 'ultimate' dimension of this world as *pratityasamutpada*. Similarly, a term such as *dharmadhatu*, meaning 'Dharma realm', "specifically refers to the world as the place of the mutual determination or conditioning of individuals; that is, the world in its true form as seen by the enlightened." Thus, in Buddhism,

the immanent language of *pratityasamutpada* is also spoken of in terms of making reference to transcendence, but a transcendence never divorced from immanence.

At this point, one sees a convergence between the two papers of Cobb and Cook which, at first glance, seem so different. While Cobb emerges from a tradition that tends to emphasize transcendence, Cook speaks from a tradition that tends to emphasize immanence. Each is moved to stress the "other side" which is normally not stressed. Cobb balances talk of God's transcendence with discussion of His immanence, while Cook balances the immanence of *pratityasamutpada* with reference to the transcendence of *dharmakaya* and *dharmadhatu*. Both see that while the immanence of ultimate reality guarantees that it is experientially accessible to human beings, its transcendence protects it from being "reduced" to the fallen or samsaric world. Nevertheless, Cobb and Cook while moving in the direction of the other, each retain the distinctiveness of their own traditions: Cobb wants particularly to protect the "transcendence" of God, while Cook wants to insist upon the immanence of transcendent terms like "*dharmakaya*" or "*dharmadhatu*."

From the papers of John Cobb and Francis Cook, it will be seen that the writers are not simply explaining their theological traditions to the other side, they are engaging in the active process of creative theology. Moreover, what they say and how they choose to say it are clearly informed by the situation of dialogue in which their theologizing takes place. In addition, these two papers were often just as interesting and informative for the other members of the traditions out of which each comes as for the other side, for Cobb and Cook are not only theologizing for the other side, but are at the same time working on theological problems within their own traditions.

Gordon Kaufman's paper, "God and Emptiness: An Experimental Essay,"<sup>5</sup> was third to be discussed. In his exploratory and stimulating paper, Kaufman wants to explore the ultimate in Christianity by focussing on the Christian view of God, a notion that emerges in the context of four principal symbols or categories particularly characteristic of Christianity: God, world, humanity, and Christ. The first three of these, Kaufman notes, are not uniquely Christian, but are central con-

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<sup>5</sup> Responded to by Profs. Takeda and Gross.

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cerns of the so-called Abrahamic religions. The fourth, Christ, is distinctively Christian and it is Christ that Kaufman will emphasize in his "experimental essay." Here, Kaufman would take a slightly different theological tack from the standard and, in so doing, to arrive at "a conception of God which might bring Christian understandings into much closer proximity with Buddhist conceptions of 'ultimate reality' than has usually been thought possible."

Referring to his four pivotal notions, Kaufman speaks of *God* as "the ultimate point of reference . . . in Christian perspectives," a notion that has all too often been the object of a difficult-to-defend reification in piety and theological reflection. The *world* refers to the "heavens and the earth," the entire manifest universe which is understood in Christianity as the creation of God. *Humanity* comprises all people, created in the image of God and possessing thereby powers of intelligence and freedom. *Christ* is the figure from human history who reveals both who or what God really is on the one hand and, on the other, what true humanity consists in.

Taking seriously the notion that God and man are definitively revealed in Jesus Christ, Kaufman would reconceive the normativity of the Christ-event, away from more theologically current notions of sovereign power and lordship. In reconceiving this normativity of the Christ-event, Kaufman sees himself bringing it into closer proximity to certain Buddhist emphases. Kaufman asks, "What would happen if Jesus Christ—particularly Jesus' cross, his 'weakness' (I Cor. 1:25), his suffering and death—were made the central and defining image or metaphor in terms of which the 'ultimate point of reference' for all life and reality were conceived, instead of a notion constructed in terms of metaphors like sovereign power and lordship?" Here would be an emphasis on Jesus Christ's self-giving, suffering, death and love, an emphasis that stands as the central reference point for all of life. "That which is insubstantial, that which does not maintain itself successfully through time and is thus not a 'thing' or 'substance', that which (as Tillich put it in his interpretation of Christ) sacrifices itself completely to its context and to that beyond itself, is now to be seen as the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else must be understood and grasped. . . . This emphasis moves toward a conception suggestive of the Buddhist view that everything must be understood in terms of *sunyata* or 'emptiness.' . . . [It] would move in emphasis and orienta-

tion toward those strands of Buddhism which interpret human life primarily in terms of such symbols as compassion and emptiness." Such a movement, while not meaning that Christianity was giving up its distinctiveness from Buddhism, does enable a profound point of contact between the two traditions. From another angle, this emphasis would enable Christianity to overcome certain internal theological problems, such as reification (which "would now be left behind"), as well as to clarify its distinctiveness vis a vis the other Abrahamic faiths.

Kaufman's paper is fascinating because it illustrates in a particularly clear way, something of the kind of ferment and creativity that are currently characterizing the Theological Encounter. In his paper, Kaufman shows first, how his engagement with Buddhism over the past meetings has stimulated his own theological reflection. Secondly, this reflection has led to fresh theological thinking on his part, which helps him at once to discover the depth of similar elements within Buddhism as well as to rediscover previously unseen riches in his own Christological tradition. Thirdly, this discovery/rediscovery permits him fresh perspectives on central problems in Christian theology, such as the reification of God. Finally, out of the process, Kaufman's theological understanding emerges with a greater appreciation of the distinctiveness of Christianity vis a vis the other Abrahamic faiths as well as a more informed and more accurate understanding of its relationship to Buddhism.

In Jeffrey Hopkins' essay, "Ultimate Reality in Tibetan Buddhism,"<sup>6</sup> the last paper to be discussed, Hopkins moves beyond the standard discussion of 'ultimate reality' in Mahayana Buddhism as simply *sunyata* or emptiness. Instead, Hopkins offers a rich reflection on the various ways in which 'ultimates' may be discussed in Mahayana Buddhism. Thus 'ultimate reality' may be discussed in terms of its "*Basis*" as: 1) What exists (as opposed to that which appears to exist, but in fact does not); 2) As ultimate truth (that which is the "final mode of subsistence, the mode of being, of what exists," namely its emptiness [*sunyata*] or non-reifiable nature); 3) As that of which phenomena are empty (namely, inherent existence [*svabhava*]). In none of these senses, Hopkins tells us, is ultimate reality to be reified. Again, 'ultimate reality' may also be discussed in terms of the "*Path*" as: 4) A wisdom con-

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<sup>6</sup> Responded to by Profs. Ching and Foster.



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consciousness (“the prime wisdom consciousnesses that realize ultimate truth”); 5) The mind of clear light (“the most subtle and powerful level of consciousness, the mind of clear light directly realizing the emptiness of inherent existence”). Finally, ‘ultimate reality’ may be discussed in terms of the “*Goal*” as: 6) Nirvana (finally “a state that abides neither in cyclic existence nor in solitary inactive peace. . . Buddhahood”); and 7) The final goal (service to others).

In his analysis, Hopkins takes a functional approach to defining ‘ultimate reality.’ Many things are said in Buddhism on this topic and just what is meant depends upon the immediate semiological context of the term and its particular function within the threefold division of Buddhism into Basis, Path, and Fruit. Although Hopkins draws principally upon Gelukba tradition, his analysis has implications for the development of a comprehensive model of Buddhist ways of speaking about ultimate reality. Perhaps many of the differences and apparent conflicts within Buddhist schools on this topic may be partially understood not as opposing and mutually exclusive concepts, but as ideas emerging in different historical contexts and having different intentions and functions within the tradition.

In reflecting on the papers as a group, one is led to some observations. John Cobb’s paper illustrates an unparalleled maturity in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue to date. As is evidenced in this paper, Cobb has “crossed over” in much the manner described in his *Beyond Dialogue* (1982). He has learned and reflected deeply upon what the Buddhists have to say, particularly in their doctrine of *sunyata*, and has “returned” to carry on his theological work from a transformed standpoint. Moreover, in his paper, in his experiential language and his reference to a common humanity, Cobb knows how to meet the Buddhists more than half way. On the basis of his understanding of Buddhism and Buddhists, and with his methodology of communication, Cobb is then able to raise in a creative and very credible way a question raised in the earliest days of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, namely that of the possible differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Moreover, in his summary of the Buddhist position on emptiness, Cobb is in effects asking “Do I have your tradition right?” and invites Buddhist response. Most suggestively, Cobb presents a theology not just of Christianity, but of Christianity and Buddhism together, and of their relationship, correctly understood.

Kaufman's paper shows, as noted, the depth of theological encounter and transformation that are emerging in and through the conversations of the Theological Encounter. Kaufman and the other Christian theologians are, in particular, clearly taking Buddhism very seriously, and are allowing its perspectives to challenge and stimulate their own. In fact, the papers of both Cobb and Kaufman raise the interesting question of whether we are not seeing among the Christian participants a tangible expression of Christian theology and indeed of Christianity itself: to take seriously what happens in history (here the appearance of Buddhism and, in particular, of our Encounter) and to allow it to inform their theological reflection.

Each of the two Buddhist papers illustrates creative engagement in a kind of theological process with which Buddhist tradition is not historically familiar. Francis Cook attempts to make generalizations about Buddhist tradition that are historically informed and comprehensive, and also theologically accurate. He attempts to find a doctrine that expresses what he understands to express "ultimate reality" that would be acceptable to any Buddhist. Jeffrey Hopkins takes his theological inquiry in a different direction, looking at the variety of ways in which Tibetan Buddhists speak about ultimates. Like Cook, Hopkins' inquiry represents a departure from classical models of Buddhist theology, particularly in his explicit attempt to set language about ultimates in relation to their functions within different dimensions of the tradition.

The Buddhist papers illustrate a kind of engagement with the process occurring at the Theological Encounters that is in some ways different from that of the Christians. Most obviously, we Buddhists are at a more "groundbreaking" stage of our theological work than are the Christians, in several respects. First, we are still in the process of discovering the major contours of our own theological heritage, and this is true of both Western and Asian Buddhists. The explanation of this fact is simple: Asian Buddhism has theological traditions that are scholarly in nature, to be sure, but these have traditionally had little historical self-consciousness. Thus learned Buddhists will typically have a very sophisticated knowledge of the texts and theological positions of their own schools, but often no more than a superficial and stereotyped understanding of other Buddhist schools within their own culture. Beyond this, most of us do not have an extensive under-

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standing of the history, thought or practice of Buddhist traditions of other cultures or of past historical periods. These limitations have supported us in an overvaluation of the normativity of our own positions, a tendency to judge other positions purely in terms of their degree of congruity with the models of our own schools and a lack of theological agility when dealing with those foreign positions.

Thus for us Buddhists, a key element in the Encounters has been the opportunity, indeed necessity of developing a theological dialogue with other Buddhists. This, combined with the academic training of most of the Buddhist participants, has led in the direction of an increasingly broad view of what constitutes legitimate Buddhist tradition. How can one conceive of Buddhism so that all the various orientations and venerable traditions may be included? This is not a question that we Buddhists have typically asked ourselves historically, but it is a question that forms for us an important part of the Encounters.

On another front, we Buddhists have not as yet learned to take the same kind of theological advantage of the Encounters as have the Christian participants. As we have seen in the Christian papers summarized above, the Christian participants have allowed their contact with Buddhism to stimulate their theological reflection in creative directions. Particularly in the content of what they have to say, what the Christians have learned from the Buddhists leads them to theologize in some original and provocative directions.

The Buddhists are learning a great deal from the Christians, but what they are learning is more in the area of theological methodology than of theological content. The Buddhists are observing the historical, methodological and dialogical sophistication with which the Christians come to the Encounters. And they are seeing that they as Buddhists need to know much more thoroughly and deeply the historical dimension of Buddhism as a whole, including both those forms with which they are more familiar and those with which they are relatively unfamiliar. And they are seeing their need to develop models of Buddhism that are more inclusive and perhaps more neutral than the classical models of their own Buddhist heritage.

In highlighting these issues for the Buddhists, I do not mean to suggest that these are not part of the process of encounter among the Christians, but rather the opposite. These kinds of issues and questions are so much part of the process of the Christians "at the table" so to

speaking, that they have become second nature. One feels such issues implicitly present in everything the Christian participants have to say. I mean to suggest that for the Buddhists, such issues have more the feel of a new discovery facilitated by the conference setting and by the rich experience of their Christian partners in dialogue.

### *Conclusion*

All of this was brought together in some remarks made by Professor Abe at the close of the conference. Abe pointed out that in this third meeting, our Theological Encounters had moved from an initial stage of mutual understanding to a second involving mutual transformation. In the first stage, we had been chiefly preoccupied with developing greater understanding of the other tradition, and leaving behind the more gross levels of misconception. Abe continued that while this initial work is essential to any dialogue among religions and must be ongoing, it is limited in the sense that it tends to confirm the currently existing forms of the two religions, the status quo, and attempts no more than to deepen one religion's understanding of the other.

However, to communicate in this way implies that each party must try to understand "the other" deeply and without prejudice. If the partners in dialogue can accomplish this they have, in effect, opened themselves to mutual transformation. This transformation comes about as the result of a profound taking account of the other, both in seeing the other's strengths and limitations and of hearing his implicit critique of one's own tradition. Such a process leads to transformation of one's own self awareness and, ultimately, of one's own tradition. Abe remarked that during this third Theological Encounter in particular, he sees this "mutual transformation" as beginning to take place. Certainly our examination of the conference papers in this article confirms the truth of this observation.

Such a transformation is, according to Abe, crucial in contemporary times because of the grave threats to man and his humanity posed by the various technologies and religion-negating ideologies of the modern world. These latter, in particular, would deny the spiritual dimension of life, and the legitimacy of all religions. In this context, the great religions cannot remain passive and disengaged. The ethical and spiritual nihilism brought about by such forces is not only a threat

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to the great religions, but to the very continued existence of the human race itself. It is in this context, with clear recognition that the very meaning and *raison d'être* of religion itself cannot be taken for granted, that the Christian-Buddhist dialogue must be carried out.

Abe concluded by observing that, in the Encounters so far, mutual transformation is perhaps so far slightly more tangible for the Christians than for the Buddhists. The Christians come to the Encounters with a particular sense of urgency. They are acutely aware of a crisis in Christianity, and "are struggling with how the existing form of theology can be changed and developed through the confrontation with Buddhism." The Buddhist participants, on the other hand, do not appear to feel such a sense of urgency in relation to their own tradition. They have, "for the most part, tried simply to present or explain the Buddhist standpoint for Christian partners. . . ." appearing generally "satisfied with existing formulas of Buddhist thought." They have not had the same appetite to learn from Christianity toward a possible transformation of Buddhism. For example, the Christian theologians in the group have taken a great interest in and reflected deeply on the apophatically oriented Buddhist notion of *sunyata*, but the Buddhist thinkers have not taken a corresponding interest in the kataphatic Christian notion of God. However, Abe observes that the Buddhist participants need to "ask themselves whether existing formulations of Buddhist thought are dynamic enough to meet the radical changes in recent human society and the spiritual needs of contemporary fellow-beings."

This suggestion is an intriguing one particularly when one realizes that Buddhist tradition contains important teachings concerning the "dynamic" and kataphatic meaning and function of *sunyata*. Although present, these dimensions of Buddhist thought have historically remained in the background of discussions of *sunyata*. However, it may be that Buddhist theology must undergo a transformation whereby these dimensions can become more dominant, with a correspondingly greater prominence given to the question of ethics, and to the kinds of concerns reflected, for example, in John Cobb's paper on truth, justice, freedom and directedness or in Gordon Kaufman's discussion of Christ's self-giving and love.