# The Second Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter

## A Report

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ARE BOTH BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY, as systems of ideas and practices, incomplete? Can each correct its deficiencies by drawing on powerful insights and practices of the other? These are disturbing questions, because both religions, having as they do a heavy investment in the great questions of life and death, necessarily defend themselves as totally complete and adequate. Because so much is at stake, both religions have historically assumed postures of defensiveness, suspicion, and hostility. This posture is most evident in the conservative forms of Protestantism, where to admit even the slightest deficiency or imperfection is seen to imperil the very foundations of faith. But even outside fundamentalism, to ask whether another religion may contain a valuable truth lacking in one's own faith is an enormously adventuresome step.

Recent Buddhist-Christian dialogue may have reached this stage of mutual enrichment. On one level, an older, basic form of dialogue still continues, that of simply trying to understand what in the world the other party is talking about. What is emptiness? What is God? What does it mean to have faith? But beyond this essential spadework, there appears to be an emerging mutual respect, and out of that respect a growing belief that the other possesses riches which oneself needs. To admit this does not imply a deficiency in God or his love, or a deficiency in the Dharma as immutable Law, but simply a realistic admission that theology and buddhology, the terms and categories that attempt to articulate That which is beyond words and categories, is

deficient. More precisely, it means that revelation is not closed, that the Dharma is still unfolding.

While even this is too much for some, who hold on for dear life to the finger pointing to the moon, others have taken this adventuresome step in the belief that mutual enrichment is possible and desirable. An admirable example of this can be seen in recent writings by John Cobb, Jr., the process theologian, who has argued that a Christian may "cross over" to Buddhism, appropriate the fundamental Buddhist teaching of emptiness, and return to one's own Christianity enriched with something true and important. The prophets and thinkers of Christianity did not speak of emptiness, but Cobb finds this doctrine to be powerful, convincing, and usable. Is there something in Christianity for Buddhists? Have we missed something in our understanding of the Dharma? Big questions indeed.

In order to encourage and promote this new conception of interreligious dialogue, John Cobb and Abe Masao recently proposed an ongoing dialogical encounter group that would be composed of representatives of both religions. While they would speak with academic expertise, they would also speak from within their respective traditions. They would meet yearly and try to maintain the same makeup for the sake of the continuity and accumulation of understanding. Each year, some important central issue would be addressed, such as "suffering," or the nature of "ultimate reality." The format would consist of the presentation of two major papers from each religion, each paper to have two respondents. Daily meetings were to consist of reading of the responses and discussion.

A basic idea for this encounter group was to limit the participants to about twenty-four, for the sake of a kind of day-to-day intimacy that is an important element in such a dialogue. Participants represent as many different positions as is reasonably possible: Catholic and Protestant, Zen, Pure Land, and Tibetan Vajrayana. The first two meetings have included John Hick, John Cobb, David Tracy, Schubert Ogden, Hans Kung, Langdon Gilkey, Julia Ching, Gordon Kaufman, David Lockhead, David Chappell, Rosemary Reuther, and John Berthrong on the Christian side, and, on the Buddhist side, Abe Masao, Tokiwa Gishin, Taitetsu Unno, Rita Gross, Jeffrey Hopkins, Reginald Ray, Miyuki Mokusen, and myself. The exact configuration has varied slightly over the first two meetings due to such matters as illness, but

the group has maintained a high degree of uniformity. All participants are agreed that this has led to the progress made so far.

The first meeting of the encounter group was at Hawaii Loa College in early January, 1984, at which the topic of "suffering" was addressed as being a good starting place. Both traditions speak of suffering in their respective ways. The two papers by Hick and Gilkey dealt systematically and in detail with the problem of theodicy; i.e., why does a loving and all-powerful God permit suffering? Buddhist papers and responses tended to stress the difference between what Christians mean by "suffering" and what Buddhists understand by the term. It became apparent that Christianity does not have the equivalent of what Buddhists mean by the term, and Buddhists do not have a theodicy (or "dharmadicy") problem, lacking as they do the notion of an all-powerful creator figure. 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.

This second conference 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 Hawaii conference was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities). In the midst of the towering evergreens, the bays of the Northern Pacific, and snowcapped mountains, the encounter group took up the topic of "ultimate transformation." The term, suggested recently by Frederick Streng, was chosen as being comprehensive and neutral, allowing Christians to speak of this transformation as the event of faith and Buddhists to speak of liberation, enlightenment, or rebirth in the Pure Land. While suffering is that condition which motivates the individual to become religiously engaged, ultimate transformation is, at least in some sense, the transcendence of the human condition.

Abe Masao's paper, "Transformation in Buddhism," spoke in normative terms of the Buddhist transformation as the "realization of death." While Hōnen and Shinran would probably have disagreed with this characterization, and while Abe's definition has a decidedly Zen—even Dōgenesque—ring to it, it may be said that this is the nature of ultimate transformation for most of Buddhism for its entire history. Beginning with the remark that "transformation in Buddhism centers

around the realization of death," he proceeded to argue that the Buddhist idea of transformation for both individual and society can not be grasped apart from such a realization. This becomes clear when death is seen in relation to other symbols, such as impermanence, craving, and suffering, and consequently, while Abe speaks from a Zen perspective, what he says can be seen in the life of Śākyamuni—his motive for making his home departure, the structure of his "Four Noble Truths," for instance—and all of the subsequent history of the Dharma. Abe mainly was concerned with elucidating the Buddhist view of life as a "living-dying" life, a view which sees life not as dualistically opposed to death but as a process composed at each moment of both perishing and coming-to-be. The Buddhist approach, consequently, is to realize one's true nature as living-dying and thus to become free of clinging to life and evading death as two opposed objective realities. Drawing on the thought of Hisamatsu and Nishitani, Abe concluded his paper by drawing out the implications of this kind of "investigation of the self" (*koji kyūmei*) as they apply to the dynamic expression of liberation in history as one consequently investigates the world (*sekai kyūmei*) and history (*rekishi kyūmei*) and participates in them and reforms them in accordance with the fundamental insight into impermanence.

Rita Gross performed a great service for the meeting in her paper, "The Three-yana Journey in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism," in which she described in some detail the Vajrayana student's progress from "Hinayana" practices and attainments through the Mahayana *pāramitā* attainments and culminating in specifically Tibetan Vajrayana practices and accomplishments. The paper was very educational, since the Christian participants in the conference were primarily acquainted with either Zen writings or "Hinayana" materials and probably even most of the Buddhists there had only a vague idea of what Tibetan practice is. The enormous complexity of this gradual wending of one's way through the three vehicles is interesting in comparison with Zen, Pure Land, and Christianity, both in theory and praxis. What could be simpler than Dōgen's "nothing but zazen," in which practice is from the beginning enlightenment (*shushō ittō*), or the arising of faith in Pure Land or Luther's Protestantism? Yet, despite this patient attention to long and complex practice, Vajrayana, according to Gross, is but a way of leading the practitioner to "seeing the phenomenal world as it is without distortion, in its vividness and

luminosity," "a journey without a goal," and "an unfolding of what is always present." In this way, it sounds very much like Zen and other forms of Buddhism, whatever the *yāna*.

Papers discussing the Protestant and Catholic perspectives were delivered by Schubert Ogden and David Tracy, respectively. Ogden's paper, not surprisingly, defined ultimate transformation in terms of faith, understood as trust (or assurance) and loyalty. "Ultimate transformation as either the process or as an instance of change from an inauthentic to an authentic self-understanding is the change from sin to faith, from unfaith and idolatry to trust in God's love and loyalty to it [and to all others whom God loves] alone as strictly ultimate." Drawing on historical studies of Christianity's self-perception, his own indebtedness to Bultmann's existential reading of the Bible, and, among other sources, Whitehead's process thought, Ogden drew out the implications of this trust and loyalty in a rich and satisfying way. Buddhists at the conference must have been struck by the deep resonance with Shinran's thought. Specifically, the deep trust in God's creation in all its dimensions and structures for the individual in whom this faith has blossomed bears a remarkable resemblance to the *anjin* ("tranquil heart") characteristic of Jōdō *myōkōnin*. As Mahayana Buddhists, we were equally impressed with the final section of the paper, which elaborated on the implications of loyalty to those whom God loves. Ogden emphasized that this means *everyone*, and parallels with the Mahayana teaching of the career of the bodhisattva and the fruition of the religious life in indiscriminate compassion came to mind. Certainly both religions possess abundant resources for effecting human society and history. Having said this, however, many questions arise concerning radically different ontologies, views of history, and related matters.

David Tracy is known as a hermeneutist, and his paper, "The Christian Understanding of Salvation-Liberation," reflected his orientation. However, what was particularly noteworthy was his agreement with Ogden that faith as trust was the decisive transforming event in the life of the Christian. He further emphasized that this faith means "not . . . a *belief that* certain cognitive meanings are true. Christian faith, as an experience of salvation, fundamentally means a *belief in* (a trust in, acceptance of) the God of Jesus Christ." However, Tracy went beyond this clarification to make several points that were suggestive to those of

us who are both Buddhists who wish to understand their religion and academics who write and teach about Buddhism. One was the sound hermeneutical principle that any symbol (salvation, liberation) is only understandable in the context of all other symbols in the system. In a subsequent discussion of faith as liberation *from* various forms of bondage and *to* authentic existence, he suggested that an exclusive focus on the single symbol of liberation alone to the exclusion of others, such as God the Creator, can limit a religious discussion "of only the existential meaning of the search for salvation." Such a limitation blinds the Christian to the teaching of the goodness of creation. Tracy was particularly concerned to specify the precise sense in which the awakening of faith is a liberating experience, and I, as one observer, found his description to be quite Buddhistic: "a release from the bondage of an anxious sense of radical transience, from anxiety in the face of death, from anxiety in the face of the seeming meaninglessness or absurdity of existence, and from bondage to a sense of being trapped without hope of release in systematically distorted structures of one's individual psyche or of society and history." This could have been said by Nāgārjuna, Dōgen, or Nishitani Keiji. It makes one wonder.

Space will not permit a summary of the responses, though in an important way they were the focus of each session. Suffice to say that the ensuing discussions were lively and mutually satisfying. The participants seem to be 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.

Whatever else may be accomplished by such dialogue groups, I believe it is safe to say that as teachers, writers, and committed members of these religions, we are acquiring on the one hand an increasing appreciation for the kind of radical pluralism of world religions such as has been argued by John Hick, William Cantwell Smith, and others, and on the other hand, an appreciation for the potential for radical transformation in the various religions. This latter realization became clearer at the Vancouver conference, which dealt at

some length with the nature of Christian faith.

It is a commonplace that Christianity is a religion of faith, whereas Buddhism is a religion of *prajñā*-insight. Faith, we say, is all well and good in the early phase of Buddhist practice, but later it must be replaced with a profound change in self-knowledge and perception of the world. But such a view fails to appreciate the nature of faith as a trust or assurance such as had been articulated by Shinran and Luther. If such a trust is the fruit of the religious life in the sense that it enables an individual to deal satisfactorily with the elemental structure of existence, meaning mainly suffering, loss, impermanence, and death, then I must question whether Buddhism, in *all* forms, does not in fact culminate in an identical realization. Though Buddhism has traditionally stressed the noetic dimension of the religious life, in fact the existential value of this noesis is precisely the overcoming of an unconscious compulsive behavior motivated by the fear of self-diminishment and death. If this is acceptable as a statement about what actually occurs in Buddhist enlightenment, may we not agree that, at least in their existential aspect, Buddhism and Christianity are both ultimately and importantly religions of faith-trust? Indeed, are not all so-called "salvational" religions by their very nature and structure religions of faith and necessarily so?

A great part of the value of this conference may have been the dawning understanding that both religions possess powerful resources for bringing about this ultimate transformation in individuals. For the first time, for me at least, I could truly appreciate the genius of Shinran and Luther in insisting that this trust is the essence of the religious life. This does not, of course, mean that there are no real, important differences between Christianity and Buddhism. Their radically differing anthropologies, ontologies, and views of time, for instance, are fundamental and perhaps irreconcilable. I suspect, also, that for each, the esthetic quality of faith is significantly different. However, even a casual phenomenology of trust seems to reveal that for both religions, the ultimate meaning of religion consists in an unwavering acceptance of life and death, with a corresponding behavior. Bultmann spoke of it as being able to "walk confidently into the darkness of the future"; Pure Land Buddhism speaks of it as *anjin*; Zen speaks of "perfect freedom on the brink of life and death," and "playful *samādhi* among the six paths of rebirth." Perhaps, as I said, the life of trust feels

different for Buddhists and Christians. At any rate, here, in the area of *experience*, as opposed to metaphysics, both religions may have the opportunity of meeting in a profound way. Perhaps, as others have suggested, this is the most fruitful area for dialogue, a place where people can come together in an essential common humanity.