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Abe/Zen and the Modern World

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Part I
Zen and Society

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Two Types of Unity and Religious Pluralism

In the contemporary world of religious pluralism, not only the mutual understanding between world religions but also their mutual transformation through dialogue is necessary. We now exist in a world in which many people question the legitimacy of not only a particular religion such as Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam but also the legitimacy of religion as such. The most crucial task of any religion in our time is, beyond mutual understanding, to elucidate the *raison d'être* of religion as such. In the following, I will discuss three issues that suggest how mutual transformation is possible. The first issue is the role of a monotheistic God and the realization of Nichts (Nothingness); the second concerns two types of unity or oneness; and the third deals with justice and wisdom.

First, let us consider the role of a monotheistic God and the realization of Nichts. Western scholars often discuss religion in terms of a contrast between ethical religion and natural religion (as in the work of C. P. Tile), prophetic religion and mystical religion (F. Heiler), and monotheistic religion and pantheistic religion (W. F. Albright, A. Lang), with the first in each pair referring to Judeo-Christian-Muslim religions and the second to most of the Oriental religions. This kind of bifurcation has been set forth by scholars with such "Western" religions as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the standard of comparative judgment. Consequently, non-Semitic "Oriental" religions are often not only lumped together under a single category, despite their rich variety, but also grasped from outside without any penetration into their inner religious core. Unlike the Semitic religions, which most Western scholars recognize as having a clear com-

mon character, such Oriental religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto exhibit significant differences in their religious essence and hence cannot legitimately be classified into a single category. Partly to bring this point into sharper focus and partly because I represent Buddhism, I will take up Buddhism alone from among the Oriental religions and contrast it with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Most Western scholars correctly characterize Judaism, Christianity, and Islam not as natural, mystical, and pantheistic religions but as ethical, prophetic, and monotheistic ones. All three religions are based on the one absolute God: Yahweh in Judaism, God the Father in Christianity, and Allah in Islam. In each of these religions the one God is believed to be a personal God who is essentially transcendent to human beings but whose will is revealed to human beings through prophets and who commands people to observe certain ethico-religious principles. Although we should not overlook some conspicuous differences in emphasis among these three religions, we can say with some justification that they are ethical, prophetic, and monotheistic.

In contrast, Buddhism does not talk about one absolute God who is essentially transcendent to human beings. Instead, it teaches *pratityasamutpada*, that is, the law of dependent origination or conditional coproduction as the Dharma (Truth). This teaching emphasizes that everything in and beyond the universe is interdependent, co-arising and co-ceasing (not only temporarily, but also ontologically) with everything else. Nothing exists independently or can be said to be self-existing. Accordingly, in Buddhism, everything without exception is relative, relational, nonsubstantial, and changeable. Even the divine (Buddha) does not exist by itself but is entirely interrelated to humans and nature. This is why Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, did not accept the age-old Vedantic notion of Brahman, which is believed to be the sole and enduring reality underlying the universe. For a similar reason, Buddhism cannot accept the monotheistic notion of one absolute God as the ultimate reality, but advocates *sunyata* (emptiness) and *tathata* (suchness or as-it-is-ness) as the ultimate reality. *Sunyata* as the ultimate reality in

Buddhism literally means “emptiness” or “voidness” and can imply “Absolute Nothingness.” This is because *sunyata* is entirely unobjectifiable, unconceptualizable, and unattainable by reason and will. It also indicates the absence of enduring self-being or the nonsubstantiality of everything in the universe. It is beyond all dualities and yet includes them.

In the realization of *sunyata*, not only sentient beings but also the Buddha, not only samsara of the cycle of transmigration but also nirvana or enlightenment, are without substance and are empty. Accordingly, neither Buddha nor nirvana but the realization of the nonsubstantiality of everything, that is, the realization of *sunyata*, is ultimate.

This realization of the nonsubstantial emptiness of everything is inseparably related with the law of dependent origination. Dependent origination as the Dharma is possible only when everything in the universe is without fixed, enduring substance (although possessing relative, temporal substance) and is open in its relationship with everything else. We human beings have a strong disposition to reify or substantialize objects as well as our own self as if they were permanent and unchangeable substances. This substantialization of and the concomitant attachment to objects cause human suffering. The most serious case of this problem lies in the substantialization of the self, which results in self-centeredness, and the substantialization of one’s own religion, which entails a religious imperialism. Buddhism emphasizes the awakening to *sunyata*, that is, the nonsubstantiality of everything including self and Buddha, in order to be emancipated from suffering. Thus it teaches no-self (*anatman*) and awakening to Dharma rather than faith in the Buddha.

The Buddhist emphasis on no-self and emptiness, however, as Buddhist history has shown, often causes an indifference to the problem of good and evil and especially social ethics. Buddhists must learn from monotheistic religion how the human personality can be comprehended in terms of the impersonal notion of emptiness, and how to incorporate I–Thou relationships into the Buddhist context of emptiness.

In Christianity, God is not simply transcendent but is deeply

immanent in humankind as the incarnation of the Logos in human form, namely, Jesus Christ. Yet the divine and the human are not completely interdependent, for while the human definitely is dependent upon God, God is not dependent upon the human. The world cannot exist without God, but God can exist without the world. This is because God is a self-existing deity. God can and does exist by himself without depending on anything else. In this regard, Buddhists may ask: “What is the ground of this one God who is self-existing?” The Christian might answer by stressing the importance of faith in God, this faith being nothing but the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1 AV). Further, God in Semitic religion is not merely the one absolute God in the ontological sense but a living and personal God who calls humans through his word to which humans must respond.

In his book *Does God Exist?* Hans Küng says: “God in the Bible is subject and not predicate: it is not that love is God, but that God is love—God is one who faces me, whom I can address.”¹

My Buddhist reaction to this statement is as follows: Can I not address God, not from the outside of God, but from within God? Again, is it not that God faces me within God even if I turn my back on God? The God who faces me and whom I address is God as subject. The God within whom I address God and within whom God meets me, however, is not God as subject but rather God as predicate. More strictly speaking, God is neither God as subject nor God as predicate, but God as Nichts. In God as Nichts, God as subject meets me even if I turn my back on that God, and I can truly address that God as Thou. The very I–Thou relationship between the self and God takes place precisely in God as Nichts. Since God as Nichts is the Ungrund (No-ground or Abyss) of the I–Thou relationship between the self and God, God as Nichts is neither subject nor predicate, but a copula that acts as a connecting intermediating link between the subject and the predicate. This entails that God as Nichts is Nichts as God; or God is Nichts and Nichts is God. On this basis we may say that God is love and love is God, because Nichts is the uncondi-

tional, self-negating love. This is the absolute interior of God's mystery, which is its absolute exterior at one and the same time. We may thus say God is love because God is Nichts: Nichts is God because Nichts is love.

This interpretation may not accord with traditional orthodoxy. Here, however, both human longing for salvation and the deepest mystery of God are thoroughly fulfilled. Further, God as subject who meets one and whom one can address as Thou is incompatible with the autonomous reason so important to modern humanity and so is also challenged by Nietzschean nihilism and atheistic existentialism. The notion of God as Nichts, however, is not only compatible with but can also embrace autonomous reason, because there is no conflict between the notion of God as Nichts (which is neither subject nor predicate) and autonomous reason, and because the autonomy of rational thinking, however much it may be emphasized, is not limited by the notion of God as Nichts. In the self-negating or self-emptying God who is Nichts, not only are modern human autonomous reason and rationalistic subjectivity overcome without being marred, but also the mystery of God is most profoundly perceived. God as love is fully and most radically grasped far beyond contemporary atheism and nihilism.

The second main issue in discussing religion concerns two types of unity or oneness. To any religion, the realization of the oneness of ultimate reality is important because religion is expected to offer an integral and total—rather than fragmental or partial—salvation from human suffering. Even a so-called polytheistic religion does not believe in various deities without order; it often worships a certain supreme deity as a ruler over a hierarchy of innumerable gods. Further, three major deities often constitute a trinity—as exemplified by the Hindu notion of Trimurti, or the threefold deity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Such a notion of trinity in polytheism also implies a tendency toward a unity of diversity—a tendency toward oneness.

This means that in any religion the realization of the oneness of ultimate reality is crucial. Yet the realization of oneness necessarily entails exclusiveness, intolerance, and religious imperial-

ism, which cause conflict and schism within a given religion and among various religions. This is a very serious dilemma, which no world religion can escape. How can we believe in the oneness of the ultimate reality in our own religion without falling into exclusive intolerance and religious imperialism toward other faiths? What kind of oneness of ultimate reality can solve that dilemma and open up a dimension in which positive tolerance and peaceful coexistence are possible among religions, each of which is based on one absolute reality?

In this connection I distinguish between two kinds of oneness or unity. First, monotheistic oneness or unity; second, nondualistic unity or oneness. It is my contention that not the former but the latter kind of unity or oneness may provide a genuine common basis for the contemporary pluralistic situation of world religions. How, then, are monotheistic oneness and nondualistic oneness different from each other? I will clarify their differences by making the following four points.

First, monotheistic oneness is realized by distinguishing itself and setting itself apart from dualistic twoness and pluralistic manyness. Monotheism essentially excludes any form of dualism and pluralism and, therefore, stands in opposition to them. Precisely because of this oppositional relation, monotheistic oneness is neither a singular oneness nor a truly ultimate oneness. To realize true oneness we must go not only beyond dualism and pluralism but also beyond monotheistic oneness itself. Only then can we realize nondualistic oneness, because at that point we are completely free from any form of duality, including the duality between monotheism and dualism or pluralism.

Second, in monotheism, God is the ruler of the universe and the lawgiver to humans and his being is only remotely similar and comparable to beings of the world. Although the monotheistic God is accessible by prayer and comes to be present among humans through love and mercy, his transcendent character is undeniable. The monotheistic God is somewhat “over there,” not completely right here and right now. Contrary to this case, nondualistic oneness is the ground or root-source realized right here and right now from which our life and activities can properly

begin. When we overcome monotheistic oneness, we come to a point that is neither one nor two nor many but is appropriately referred to as “zero” or nonsubstantial emptiness. Since the zero is free from any form of duality and plurality, true oneness can be realized through the realization of zero. My usage of zero in this regard, however, may be misleading, because zero is often used to indicate something negative. But in this context I use zero to indicate the principle that is positive and creative as the source from which one, two, many, and the whole can emerge. Since I use zero not in a negative sense but a positive and creative sense, I may call it “great zero.” Monotheistic oneness is a kind of oneness that lacks the realization of great zero, whereas nondualistic oneness is a kind of oneness that is based on the realization of great zero.

Third, the true oneness, which can be attained through the realization of great zero, should not be objectively conceived. If it is objectified or conceptualized in any way, it is not real oneness. An objectified oneness is merely something named “oneness.” To reach and realize true oneness fully, it is necessary to completely overcome conceptualization and objectification. True oneness is realized only in a nonobjective way by overcoming even great zero objectified as an end or goal. Accordingly, overcoming great zero as an end is a turning point from the objective, aim-seeking approach to the nonobjective, immediate approach, from monotheistic oneness to nondualistic oneness. Monotheistic oneness is oneness before the realization of great zero.

Fourth, monotheistic oneness, being somewhat “over there,” does not immediately include two, many, and the whole. Even though it can be all-inclusive, it is more or less separated from the particularity and multiplicity of actual entities-in-the-world. This is because the monotheistic God is a personal God who commands and directs people. Nondualistic oneness, however, which is based on the realization of great zero, includes all individual things just as they are, without any modification. This is because in nondualistic oneness, conceptualization and objectification are overcome completely and radically. There is no separation between nondualistic oneness and individual things. At this point the one and the many are nondual.

The view of monotheistic unity does not admit fully the distinctiveness or uniqueness of each religion united therein, due to the lack of the realization of great zero, or nonsubstantial emptiness. By contrast, the view of nondualistic unity thoroughly allows the distinctiveness or uniqueness of each religion without any limitation through the realization of great zero, or emptiness. This is because the nondualistic unity is completely free from conceptualization and objectification and is without substance. In this nondualistic unity, all world religions in their uniqueness are dynamically united without being reduced to a single principle. This is, however, not an uncritical acceptance of the given pluralistic situation of religions. Instead, the nondualistic unity makes a critical acceptance and creative reconstruction of world religions possible because each religion is grasped in the nondualistic unity—not from the outside but deeply from within according to the dynamic laws of a positionless position, in other words, a position that is completely free from any particular position as absolute.

Let me make a proposal for how world religions can be re-grasped from the standpoint of nondualistic unity in a manner that fosters world peace. When the divine, whether God or Buddha, is believed to be self-affirmative, self-existing, enduring, and substantial, the divine becomes authoritative, commanding, and intolerant. By contrast, when the divine, God or Buddha, is believed to be self-negating, relational, and non-substantial, the divine becomes compassionate, all-loving, and tolerant.

If monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam place more emphasis on the self-negating, nonsubstantial aspect of their God rather than the self-affirmative, authoritative aspect of God—that is, if these religions understand the oneness of absolute God in terms of nondualistic oneness rather than in terms of monotheistic oneness—then they may overcome serious conflicts with other faiths and establish a stronger interfaith cooperation to contribute to world peace.

The third main issue deals with justice and wisdom. In Western religions, God is believed to have the attribute of justice, or righteousness as the judge, as well as love, or mercy as the for-

giver. God is the fountain of justice, so everything God does may be relied upon as just. Since God's verdict is absolutely just, human righteousness may be defined in terms of God's judgment.

The notion of justice, or righteousness, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it aids in keeping everything in the right order, but on the other hand, it establishes clear-cut distinctions between the righteous and the unrighteous, promising the former eternal bliss but condemning the latter to eternal punishment. Accordingly, if justice, or righteousness, is the sole principle of judgment or is too strongly emphasized, it creates serious disunity and schism among people. This disunity is unresolvable because it is a result of divine judgment.

Although his religious background was Jewish, Jesus went beyond such a strong emphasis on divine justice and preached the indifference of God's love. Speaking of God the Father, he said, "For he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45 AV). Thus, he emphasized, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Matt. 5:44 AV). Nevertheless, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the notion of the divine is persistently evident. The Old Testament preaches God's choice of the people of Israel from among all the nations of the earth to be God's people in the possession of a covenant of privilege and blessing (Deut. 4:37, 7:6; 1 Kings 3:8; Isa. 44:1-2 AV). In the New Testament, divine election is a gracious and merciful election. Nevertheless, this election is rather restricted, for as the New Testament clearly states, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14 AV). Thus "the terms [election or elect] always imply differentiation whether viewed on God's part or as a privilege on the part of men."² In Christianity the notion of the "Elect of God" often overshadows the "indifference of God's love." If I am not mistaken, this is largely related to the emphasis on justice or righteousness.

While Christianity speaks much about love, Buddhism stresses compassion. Compassion is a Buddhist equivalent to the Christian notion of love. In Christianity, however, love is accom-

panied by justice. Love without justice is not regarded as true love, and justice without love is not true justice. In Buddhism, compassion always goes with wisdom. Compassion without wisdom is not understood to be true compassion, and wisdom without compassion is not true wisdom. Like the Christian notion of justice, the Buddhist notion of wisdom indicates a clarification of the distinction or differentiation of things in the universe. Unlike the Christian notion of justice, however, the Buddhist notion of wisdom does not entail judgment or election. Buddhist wisdom implies the affirmation or recognition of everything and everyone in their distinctiveness or in their suchness. Further, as noted above, the notion of justice creates an irreparable split between the just and the unjust, the righteous and the unrighteous, whereas the notion of wisdom evokes the sense of equality and solidarity. Again, justice, when carried to its final conclusion, often results in punishment, conflict, revenge, and even war, whereas wisdom entails rapprochement, conciliation, harmony, and peace. Love and justice are like water and fire: Although both are necessary, they go together with difficulty. Compassion and wisdom are like heat and light: Although different, they complement each other well.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, however, does not lack the notion of wisdom. In the Hebrew Bible, wisdom literature such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes occupy an important portion in which *chokma* (wisdom) frequently appears. This term refers to both human knowledge and divine wisdom. In the latter case, as wisdom given by God, it enables the person to lead a good, true, and satisfying life through keeping God's commandments. In the New Testament, *sophia* is understood to be an attribute of God (Luke 11:49), the revelation of the divine will to people (1 Cor. 2:4–7). But most remarkable, Jesus as the Christ is identified with the wisdom of God because he is believed to be the ultimate source of all Christian wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30). Nevertheless, in Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole, the wisdom aspect of God has been neglected in favor of the justice aspect of God. Is it not important and terribly necessary now to emphasize the wisdom aspect of God rather than the justice aspect of God

in order to solve the conflict within religions as well as among religions?

On the other hand, in Buddhism the notion of justice, or righteousness, is rather weak and thus it often becomes indifferent to social evil and injustice. If Buddhism learns from Western religions the importance of justice and develops its notion of compassion to be linked not only with wisdom but also with recognizing and treating evil, it will become even closer to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in its interfaith relationship and may become more active in establishing world peace.