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**A BUDDHIST VIEW OF MONOTHEISM**  
**--MONOTHEISTIC ONENESS AND NONDUALISTIC ONENESS--**

by

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## A Buddhist View of Monotheism

### --Monotheistic Oneness and Nondualistic Oneness--

Masao Abe

To any religion, the realization of the oneness of ultimate reality is important. For religion is expected to offer an integral and total--rather than fragmented or partial--salvation from human suffering. Even so-called "polytheistic" religion does not proscribe belief in various deities without order, but often provides for worship of a certain supreme deity as a ruler over a hierarchy of innumerable gods. Further, the major deities often interrelate in the constitution of a "trinity"--as exemplified by the Hindu notion of trimurti, the threefold deity of Brahman, Visnu, and Siva. 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--and especially in higher religion--the realization of the oneness of ultimate reality is crucial. Monotheistic religion is precisely a religion which maintains the belief that the cosmos is a unity and that only one personal, transcendent God exists in the universe who is the creator and orders all things. But monotheistic oneness necessarily entails exclusiveness, intolerance, and religious imperialism, which cause conflict and schism within a given religion and among various religions. This is a grave dilemma which no higher religion can escape. In particular, the most serious conflict takes place among monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hence we have this committee on the "Search for Unity among the Monotheistic Religions". How can we believe in the one ultimate reality of 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 would like to distinguish two kinds of oneness: the first, monotheistic; the second, nondualistic. It is my contention that not the former but the latter kind of oneness may solve our dilemma. How, then, are monotheistic and non-dualistic oneness different from one another? I would like to 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 or polytheistic manyness. Monotheism must also be distinguished from even henotheism. Monotheism 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. In order to realize true oneness we must go not only beyond dualism and pluralism but also beyond monotheistic oneness itself. Then we can realize nondualistic oneness, because at that point we are completely free from any form of duality, including the duality between monotheism and dualism and the duality between monotheism and polytheism.

Second, monotheistic oneness is realized in God who is the ruler of the universe and the law-giver to humans and whose being is only remotely similar and comparable to the 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 sometimes "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 which is neither one nor two nor many, but which is appropriately referred to as "zero". Since the "zero" is free from any form of duality, true oneness can be realized through the realization of "zero". Monotheistic oneness is a kind of oneness which lacks the realization of "zero", Whereas nondualistic oneness is a kind of oneness which is based on the realization of "zero".

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

Fourth, monotheistic oneness, being sometimes "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 "zero,"

includes all individual things just as they are, without any modification. This is because in nondualistic oneness, conceptualization and objectification are completely and radically overcome. There is no separation between nondualistic oneness and individual things. At this point, the one and the many are nondual.

Buddhism often emphasizes the oneness of body and mind, the oneness of life and death, the oneness of good and evil, and the identity of samsara and nirvana, Buddha and sentient beings. It also talks about ekacitta (one dharma Mind), ekalapsana (one Nature), ekayana (one Vehicle), and the like. It appears to be quite monistic or "monotheistic" from a surface perspective. In view of the difference between monotheistic oneness and nondualistic oneness as described in the above four points, however, it is clear that the Buddhist notion of oneness is not monotheistic, but nondualistic. Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, rejected the age-old Vedantic notion of Brahman, as the sole and enduring reality underlying the universe. Instead, he advocated the law of "dependent co-origination" and no-selfhood and the nonsubstantiality of everything in the universe, including the divine and the human. Even the notion of Buddha is nonsubstantial without enduring, fixed selfhood. Rather, one who awakens to the nonsubstantiality and no-selfhood of everything is called a Buddha.

Nirvana, which is often regarded as the goal of Buddhist life, is not really the goal to be reached as the end of life. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes, "Do not abide in samsara or nirvana." One should not abide in samsara, the endless process of transmigration, but, through the realization of wisdom, should attain nirvana, the blissful freedom from transmigration. However, if one remains in nirvana, one may enjoy the bliss but forget the suffering of his or her fellow beings who are still

involved in the process of samsara. Thus it is necessary "not to abide in nirvana" by overcoming the attachment to nirvana. Nirvana should not be attached to as if it were a substantial, fixed, enduring entity. In order to fulfill compassion toward one's fellow beings, one should not abide in nirvana but return to samsara. This means that true nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism does not lie either in samsara or in nirvana in a fixed sense of the terms but in a dynamic movement between samsara and nirvana without any attachment to either, without any reification of either. Accordingly, Mahayana Sutras, particularly the Prajnaparamita Sutra, emphasize the detachment from the sacred realm. In a sense this Sutra places greater emphasis on the harmfulness of attachment to the sacred realm than that of attachment to the secular realm. It stresses the necessity of detachment from the "religious" life. This is simply because the attachment to the divine as something substantial is a hindrance for true salvation and because the divine which is substantialized and objectified cannot be the true divine. Yet, Buddhism talks about one Mind, one Nature, and one Dharma. This oneness, however, is not oneness before the realization of "zero" but oneness beyond or through the realization of "zero." In short, it is not monotheistic oneness but nondualistic oneness. In the long history of Buddhism we have had troubles from time to time when we deviated from this nondualistic oneness in our faith.

When the divine, God or Buddha, is believed to be self-affirmative, self-existing, enduring, and substantial, the divine becomes authoritative, commanding, and intolerant. On the contrary, when the divine, God or Buddha, is believed to be self-negating, relational, and nonsubstantial, the divine becomes compassionate, all-loving, and tolerant. I believe all three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) preach the

love of God while emphasizing the Absolute Oneness of God. If our friends of these three religions place more emphasis on the self-negating, nonsubstantial aspect of their "God" than on God's self-affirmative authoritative aspect, that is, if the Oneness of God in these monotheistic religions<sup>20</sup> grasped not as one before the realization of "zero," but as one in and through the realization of "zero," while thoroughly maintaining their faith in the One absolute God, they may then overcome serious conflicts with other faiths. In this case, as a correlative attribute of God's love and mercy, the wisdom aspect of God must be more emphasized than the justice aspect of God.

This is my humble proposal to this conference as a Buddhist remedy to the problem of the "Search for Unity among Monotheistic Religions." In conclusion, I quote the following words of Buddha:

Not by hatred is hatred appeased:

Hatred is appeased by the renouncing of hatred.

It is so conquered only by love

This is a law eternal.

This paper is largely based on my essay, "Religious Tolerance and Human Rights: A Buddhist Perspective" in Religious Liberty and Human Rights, edited by Leonard Swidler. 1986.