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Masao Abe: A Bodhisattva's Vow

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About ten years ago, I enjoyed a fine Japanese lunch with my friend and teacher, the late Masao Abe. I gathered with him and his wife, Ikuko, in a traditional restaurant in Kyoto. Abe Sensei had been somewhat pensive and withdrawn for most of the meal. Mrs. Abe and I had been bantering about how late the *tsuyu* rains had been that year and the effect it was having on Kyoto's hydrangea. Suddenly Sensei began to speak with an unusual tone of voice, as if saying something of great importance to no one in particular. "It is not enough," he said. Mrs. Abe and I fell silent and attentive. He repeated himself in the same voice: "It is not enough." I knew immediately what my teacher was talking about. In his old age and after a long and distinguished career of teaching and lecturing about Zen in the West, Abe Sensei was talking about a Buddhist teaching dear to his heart, "the standpoint of emptiness." Out of politeness, I did not want to indicate that I understood his meaning so directly and sat wondering what I should say in response. Finally, I settled on something like this: "I will continue to study; Sensei, please continue to teach." I spoke in the most formal Japanese I could muster out of respect for my teacher and friend.

Sitting on the *tatami* mats in that restaurant in Kyoto was not the only time that Sensei has ever said "it is not enough." In April 1942, four months after the beginning of the Pacific War, Masao Abe entered Kyoto Imperial University to study philosophy of religion. He was twenty-seven years old, buffeted by criticism for not enlisting in the military, and fearful of the power of nihilism at work in his homeland. In Kyoto, he was much attracted by the lectures of Tanabe Hajime, who was already filled with foreboding over Japan's impending defeat and looking to Pure Land Buddhism for guidance. Tanabe's comment "Amida is not far from here" brought Abe to weep inconsolably in the realization that it was he who was moving away from Amida even as Amida was moving toward him. Even still, Sensei would eventually find the Pure Land path "not enough" for resisting the forces of nihilism in the world and in himself.

After the war, Abe joined a Zen meditation group that met at Myōshin-ji in Kyoto. The group was directed by Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, a Zen layman and lecturer on Buddhism at the university. In December 1951, Abe had a violent encounter with Hisamatsu that people still talk about. Zen had begun to erode Abe's Pure Land faith and the threat of nihilism had returned in force. One evening, in great agitation,

Abe rose from his meditation pillow and lunged toward Hisamatsu screaming, "Is this the true self?" He was restrained briefly and then left the room. Later, Abe said in despair, "I cannot find anyplace where I can stand," and Hisamatsu answered him straight away: "Stand right at that place where there is no place to stand." This is what Abe Sensei called "the standpoint of emptiness." Abe would eventually teach at great universities in the United States and Europe and become one of the leading figures in the dialogue among Buddhists and Christians. At the heart of all of this has been his unwavering commitment to expounding the standpoint of emptiness. Unwavering, that is, until that day in Kyoto over lunch when he said, "It is not enough."

Of Buddhism's many impressive teachings, the bodhisattva ideal must be one of the most wondrous. A bodhisattva is one who, in the quest for enlightenment, has come to the threshold of nirvana itself. Ready to enter into bliss, the bodhisattva renounces nirvana and turns back to samsara. This return to samsara takes the form of a vow to work skillfully for the benefit of every sentient being. In the bodhisattva's vow, Buddhism teaches a great and paradoxical truth. Since attachment is the birthplace of sorrow, wisdom requires that attachment be renounced. In the quest for liberation from sorrow, however, the bodhisattva is the one in whom the wisdom of nonattachment has been perfected through the renunciation of every attachment—even the attachment to nirvana itself. Herein lies a paradox: only in renouncing attachment to enlightenment can enlightenment be attained. According to the bodhisattva ideal, true enlightenment involves not an escape from samsara, but rather a return to it in order to work skillfully and compassionately for the benefit of all sentient beings. Therefore, only by turning away from nirvana, falsely viewed as an object of desire, does the bodhisattva become fully enlightened. In the vow of compassion, the bodhisattva uproots the last taint of egocentricity: the desire to find personal bliss by escaping samsara.

In the restaurant in Kyoto, when my friend and teacher said, "It is not enough," and I realized that he was talking about his life's work, a feeling of gratitude and regret came over me. The regret flowed from the pathos of an old man as he realized that his life would end before his religious quest was over. Masao Abe knew that he has been more creative in imagining Christianity anew with Buddhist insight than in his quest to renew Buddhism with Christian insight. I felt gratitude as well—the gratitude every Christian should feel before a bodhisattva. My teacher renounced much over his ninety-some years of life. In his youth, the threat of nihilism drove Abe to the Pure Land path of faith. But this was not enough. Only with much anguish and at great personal cost, my friend renounced his attempt to live by faith. Later, in the confrontation with Hisamatsu, Abe began to stand in the "place where there is no place to stand"—the standpoint of emptiness embraced by the Zen path. By standing "where there is no place to stand," Sensei lived a Zen life that took him to classrooms and lecterns in the West and to the hearts of many friends, like myself, who follow the path of Christ. But then, in his old age, my wonderful friend realized that even the standpoint of emptiness was "not enough," at least, not enough for him. This last attachment had to be renounced. Bodhisattva practice demands it. I do not mean to suggest Sensei ever stopped being a Zen Buddhist. On the contrary, his words came

to me as a kind of promise that he would continue to be a good Buddhist for my benefit. I am so grateful for this. "It is not enough" was the vow of a true bodhisattva, spoken to no one in particular, but for the benefit of all.

In Kyoto, sitting on the *tatami* mats, halfway through lunch, while his wife and I bantered about *tsuyu* rains and hydrangeas, my teacher took the bodhisattva path, vowing to work for the benefit of all sentient beings, including me, his Christian friend. Sensei is gone now, but his vow of compassion remains. In this, Abe Masao remains my skillful teacher. What is to be said in the face of such compassion? "I will continue to study; Sensei, please continue to teach."