

Pathways to Faith and Interreligious Dialogue

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The impulse to write this paper is the experience gained from a series of six interreligious dialogues on religion and life held at the Dharmasthiti College of Cultural Studies, Hong Kong, during December 1992 and January 1993. In planning the dialogue series, the President of the college, Mr. Fok Tou-hui, called together myself, a Protestant minister who is the Director of the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, and two Catholic priest-scholars, Rev. Luke Tsui and Rev. Edward Chau. It was agreed that the dialogues should be on religion and life in the contemporary setting. Mr. Fok and his associates then came up with the following sub-topics:

One-dimensional existence . The plight of the contemporary person
The lonely soul . Interpersonal relationship in the modern society
'What can we trust? . Is there a fulcrum for faith?
How to transcend death? . Vision of the world beyond
Having a 'home' in daily existence . Finding a 'home' for life's destiny.
Time and eternity . The dual dimension of existence

Three Christian (Catholic and Protestant) intellectually-minded clergymen and three Buddhist and Confucian scholars were involved in the six dialogues, with the six participants paired off, one Christian and one non-Christian for each dialogue. Thus each of the six persons took part in two dialogues. The names of the three Christian participants have already been mentioned. Of the non-Christians, Mr. Fok is a lay Buddhist who lectures Buddhist philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and devotes all his free time to the Dharmasthiti College. The other two Chinese scholars are Mr. Tong Tuan-Cheng, who teaches Confucian philosophy at the Chinese University and is a vice-president of the Dharmasthiti College; and Mr. Li Yun-sheng, an educationalist who is a lay Buddhist.

The dialogues were open to the public. The attendance at one single session was between 80-100. Many came for all six sessions, paying a package fee of HK\$200. The ones who attended were mostly working men and women (estimated age, 25-45) who had at least a tertiary education or professional training. Each session lasted two hours, with a 15-minute break. Each time the dialogue was followed by a lively period of questions and answers.

Out of the experience with these dialogue meetings the following observations are made about pathways to faith in an interreligious situation.

1. WE ARE INDEED LIVING IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS WORLD, AND THE LANGUAGES OF SEVERAL RELIGIONS HAVE INTERTWINEDLY FORMED THE UNIVERSE OF MORAL DISCOURSE.

I am referring here to Hong Kong in particular, but the place could also be Tokyo or Taipei, Singapore or Seoul. Of a population of approximately 6 million, about 8% call themselves Christians (Catholics and Protestants evenly divided). The other religions are not accustomed to keeping statistics, but Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (let us leave aside the question whether Confucianism is a religion or a way of life), have permeated the thinking of Chinese people much more than Christianity, and even in a seemingly secularized society like Hong Kong, where some 98% of the inhabitants are Chinese, terms and ideas of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian origin have been imbedded in the people's vocabulary. Christianity has made its impact on the Hong Kong people in other ways - especially through the schools. Some 60% of the schools in Hong Kong are under the sponsorship of the Catholic and Protestant church bodies. The ordinary folks usually do not indulge in religious talk, and even if they happen to be using some terms which have a religious origin, they are not apt to think of, or understand, the religious meanings. My point is that Hong Kong is a good example of an Asian city where religions have cross-fertilized, if only on a relatively superficial plane like words and expressions.

The influence of language on culture and thought, however, should not be underestimated. Since religions in the end are concerned with the important questions of life, religious language clothes ideas which give answers to these questions. Even if it is true that most people ordinarily do not think of the meaning behind religious words and ideas, religious language has the potential power to awaken awareness of a religious nature in those who are receptive. The very wording of the topics for dialogue, like "finding a home for life's destiny", "transcending death," "the fulcrum of faith," etc. evoked religious quest.

The ones who attended the dialogue meetings showed themselves to be religiously receptive. They probably belong to a small minority, but they point up a certain phenomenon in contemporary life. Even though these people live in a highly secularized city, they still seem to have maintained an interest in religious questions or questions with ultimate concern. This was amply demonstrated not only by the content of the questions asked after each dialogical exchange, but also by the emotional intensity with which the questions were pursued. Characteristically, the questions were directed at not just one religion but could be addressed to Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Christianity alike. As a matter of fact, the questions contained terms and concepts which have acquired connotations traceable to more than one religious tradition, like *tao*, *t'ien*, *yi*, etc.

The questioners revealed that they have been exposed to multiple strands of religiosity. This confirms the multiplicity of religious traditions present in a society like Hong Kong. That is a fact of life. Such a fact, however, is often ignored by evangelistic-minded Christians (especially Protestant Christians) who assume that all that is required of the evangelistic task is to pursue it vigorously with no need to take the non-Christian ways of thinking seriously. Even if some of them do have some understanding of non-Christian religions, they are interested in these religious traditions only insofar as they find in the non-Christian ways of thinking "points of contact" for the Christian message to get through. These evangelistic-minded Christians are not interested in what another religious tradition has to offer on its own merits, but only insofar as it provides a springboard for evangelism. If that is the case, no dialogue on an equal basis can be accomplished. Such an evangelistic approach was not adopted by the Christian participants in the dialogue. Had it been so, the non-Christian partners would not have cared to participate in such a dialogue. A distinction is made here between what may be characterized as a one-track, monological approach to evangelism and an evangelization which is concerned with offering the gifts of the Christian religion to whoever is prepared to receive them. Evangelization in this sense makes room for dialogue.

Buddhism is historically interested in missionary-outreach. The traditional Buddhist term for it is *lung-fa*, meaning "to expand the Dharma". The Buddhist missionary impulse is characteristically a natural desire to communicate the wisdom gained and the method is to transmit enlightenment from mind to mind as light is passed from lamp to lamp. The Confucianists have always felt that they have wisdom to offer. Since

Confucianism has long been considered the mainstream of Chinese culture and since Confucian learning was for centuries the main subject-matter of the examination system for the recruitment of government officials, the Confucian sages did not have to struggle with the problem of inculturation or the problem of missionary expansion in the sense of going beyond the familiar home-territory. Typically, Confucianism spreads its influence by cultural osmosis or nurture (in the family and also in the school). Taoism (as a philosophy) was never missionary-minded. Through the ages, though, it has infused itself into Chinese culture, especially Chinese poetry and paintings, and in this respect its impact is considerable.

None of the Chinese traditions mentioned are particularly bothered by the presence of a plurality of thought. Buddhist or Confucian scholars may at times find themselves in doctrinal disputes, but on the whole they accept pluralism of thought as a matter of course. The Taoist spirit is elusive; the opposite of combative and argumentative. It is also inclusive; the opposite of divisive and exclusive.

The spirit of acceptance of philosophical or religious pluralism was demonstrated by the three Buddhist-Confucian participants in the dialogue (it was not easy to tell whether they were Buddhists or Confucians). The three Christian participants also accepted the fact of religious pluralism. We will have occasion to discuss how evangelization may take place in the face of religious pluralism. At this point it may suffice to say that because of the spirit of acceptance of pluralism, calm and reasonable dialogue prevailed.

I should add that the plurality of religious traditions which presented themselves at the dialogues were called upon to address issues which elicited universal interest. This shows that religious pluralism need not lead to sheer relativism or impasse in communication. One of the secrets of the success of the dialogue series was that the various traditions were not asked to dispute among themselves but to take part in discussing matters of universal relevance.

2. DIALOGUE IS FULL IF THE PARTNERS TREAT ONE ANOTHER AS EQUALS, AND IT IS MEANINGFUL ONLY IF THE PARTICIPANTS ARE EACH SURE OF THEIR OWN IDENTITY WHILE THEY ARE OPEN TO THE OTHERS' POINT OF VIEW.

It has already been said that none of the partners in the series of dialogue meetings assumed a superior attitude, and that each treated the others with due respect. To put it in another way, the participants viewed one another as equals. That is really a pre-requisite for open dialogue.

All the participants were sure of their own religious-philosophical

identity. Luke Tsui and Edward Chau are Catholic priests who are committed to inculturation in their work as religious educators. Not only are they avowed Catholics but they take the Chinese cultural heritage to heart, and seek its relevance in dealing with the problem of modernization for China and for the world today. I am a Protestant Minister dedicated to the study of Chinese (and Asian) religion and culture, not only from book learning, but also through encounter with people who embody certain Chinese (or Asian) religious traditions. I, too, am well aware of the problem of modernization. Contextual theology is one of my concerns, and in this kind of work, with the Christian faith as a frame of reference, not only the cultural heritage but the contemporary social, political and economic forces at work are taken seriously.

Fok Tou-hui has taken as his life-work the modernization of Buddhist thought and the re-vitalization of Chinese culture. A student of the well-known New Confucianist scholars Mou Chung-san and Tang Chun-i, Mr. Fok knows Confucian thought very well indeed. He is also a lay Buddhist *chu-shih*, meaning a Buddhist who stays at home). Mr. Tong Tuan-cheng lectures in Chinese philosophy and is the vice-president of the Dharmasthiti College (which has a Buddhist name) but he is not a *chushih*. He was also at one time a student of the New Confucianists, Mou Chung-san and Tang Chun-i, so he also has a strong grounding in Confucianism. Mr. Li Yun-sheng is a lay Buddhist with a broad Chinese cultural outlook.

There was no question but that the three Christian persons treated the other three with respect, and vice-versa. Why shouldn't this be the case? Apart from the question of personal qualifications, the respective traditions which the participants represent are classical religious traditions, and the questions which demanded attention are of contemporary relevance. Thus the dialogues were free-flowing, unhampered by any uneasy feeling on anybody's part, and they were full and substantial in content.

Moreover, the dialogues were meaningful in that each was frank about his convictions while at the same time being eager to hear what the others had to say. Differences in belief were duly noted. There were occasions when someone wished to revise his thinking in the light of a new insight, and when that was done, it was a significant happening in the dialogical process.

When I made my presentation on time and eternity I referred to the concepts of *kronos* and *kairos* from a Christian perspective. It was a new and interesting idea to my dialogue partner, Mr. Fok, that at a critical moment (*kairos*), a revelatory event breaks into chronological time (*kronos*) thereby

giving new meaning to time. Buddhism cannot conceive of revelation from “above” so to speak. Yet Buddhists do speak of sudden awakening in contrast to gradual awakening; but it is something which comes from “within” in either case. My Buddhist partner noted some parallelism in Christian and Buddhist thinking, but he also recognized that there were differences. He then said that a dramatic change in thinking whereby subsequent events are affected, as a Christian would say, is not so mystifying after all. In other words, Buddhism is not all tied up with determinism. That came through to me with clarity. Further, noting what Mr. Fok said about the sequence of events, or in Buddhist vocabulary, “the chain of caused events,” I came to a new appreciation of the validity of speaking of eternity in the light of how one moment of revelation or one action may change the character of the chain of events that follow. Thus what one does now, if it is in accordance with God’s will, has significance for eternity. I do not think that this is a new discovery as far as Christian theology is concerned, but I was gripped by that very thought when it dawned on me. Except for my reference to God’s will, Mr. Fok seemed to like what I said.

What implications does this dialogical exercise have for evangelization? When a participant in a dialogue is frank in stating his or her conviction, that is already a testament of faith. Now another participant comes who also gives a testament of faith. These two testaments are addressed to a matter of existential interest - in this case, on time and eternity. The two positions diverge at points but converge at other points. The divergence and convergence make the dialogue dynamic, and the dynamic dialogue allows each testament or testimony to change dialectically as well as to stand out all the more sharply. It is not very likely that a convinced Christian or a convinced Buddhist will be converted to another faith. However, it is conceivable that a Confucian scholar may eventually choose to be a devout Buddhist or committed Christian. If in the audience there were those who are not committed to any religion but are searching, a heightened choice between two positions was presented to them by a dialogue, so it seemed to me at first.

3. IN THE COURSE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE OCCASIONS ARISE WHEN THE PARTICIPANTS CAN SORT OUT THE NUANCES OF MEANING OF WORDS AND IDEAS BOTH IN INTERACTION AND IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR RESPECTIVE RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS.

Taking up the point made in the preceding paragraph, is the choice really clear-cut? The speakers engaged in dialogue may strike open an issue

which calls for a choice. To give an example: during discussion in relation to the question of “liberation”, one listener compared her experience as a former Christian and her present experience as a Buddhist. When she was a Christian she felt burdened by the thought that she should be generous to and serve others. But now as a Buddhist she feels free from this burden. One should be freed from attachment to the self, yes, but that does not mean that one is under obligation to help people. If she wants to help people, that is because she is free to do so. The lady then asked the speakers to explain her experience of “burden” and “freedom”.

Speaking from a Christian point of view, I said that her experience of feeling obligated to help others indicated that she was still under what St. Paul would call “the bondage of the law.” Of course, in the duration of several minutes I could not possibly explain everything about “the bondage of the law.” I also said something about “freedom by the grace of Jesus Christ.” Again, I could not explicate a great deal in that regard in a brief conversation.

The Buddhist speaker understood what the questioner meant so far as the Buddhist experience of freedom from attachment is concerned. He went on to say something about the Bodhisattva ideal of going out of one’s way to help other suffering sentient beings.

At that point I responded that the biblical tradition has a similar idea, the Suffering Servant, who voluntarily suffers on behalf of suffering humanity. “Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53)

The suffering of Christ, for the Christian, is a full embodiment of the Suffering Servant. I realized that it would take more than a few sentences to expound this important idea. I realized, too, that it would take more than a lecture to show that while there are similarities between the Bodhisattva and the Suffering Servant, the two are different enough to pose alternative positions on the power of vicarious suffering to set one free; but free from what? Free from “ignorance” in one case; free from “sin” in the other (both terms need elaboration). Though I spoke eloquently and I knew what I was saying, yet it was a most frustrating experience; for I understood that we were here touching upon a basic human predicament but one which is approached somewhat differently by two great belief systems.

My point in recalling this episode is that even if two religious traditions intersect at certain points, it does not necessarily mean that a clearcut alternative is presented. However, the opportunity is afforded to clarify nuances of meaning behind terms and ideas. This is done by juxtaposing

related concepts as well as by placing them in the context of their respective religious or philosophical systems.

Supposing now that a listener was led to the point where she or he could see the alternative positions clearly; could choose the path of the Bodhisattva or that of the Suffering Servant. As I have suggested, one should follow the development of an article of faith in its given context. In this case, another article of faith presents itself, and it too should be understood in its context. Granted that in this age of cultural-religious cross-fertilization, the contexts are interlaced, and concomitantly the dicta or beliefs concerned have occasions to encounter and interact, nevertheless, it is not necessary that there be a confusion of identities. The identity of the Bodhisattva and that of the Suffering Servant can still remain distinct, although the two may shine on each other to bring out the hidden qualities of each ever more brightly. Now the religious quester brings into the picture her or his own personal and cultural context too. For the sake of one's peace, one may come to a point where one sees fit to follow one path rather than the other, even with the latter shining on the chosen path to give an added hue. In the case of the Bodhisattva and the Suffering Servant, this mutual reflection of light can be done without disturbing one in walking on the chosen path safely and steadily.

So in the end, not only can the sorting out of the nuances of meaning concerning the objects of spiritual quest be done via the dialogical process but also a religious decision may be made. It hardly needs to be added that it may be a long and arduous process. Such a process has implications for evangelization.

4. EVANGELIZATION MAY INDEED TAKE PLACE THROUGH DIALOGUE IN AN INTERRELIGIOUS WORLD, AND EVANGELIZATION IS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS WHICH CONTINUES TO INVOLVE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE.

Thus far I have not said much about "evangelization." I did suggest that it expresses itself in the offering of gifts by a religion to whoever is ready to receive them. I would now like to develop the idea further.

"Evangelism" in traditional Christian thinking is usually conceived as a one-way traffic with the focus on making the Christian message heard. Because there is a certain compulsiveness associated with the traditional kind of evangelism, evangelism is often not a welcome activity outside Christian circles. Furthermore, traditional evangelism has little regard for religions other than the Christian faith and has scanty interest in indigenous cultures. If the focus is on the hearing of the message, and it is a foreign sounding message at that, evangelism falls short of a lasting impact.

“Evangelization” may or may not be a better word. At least the “-ization” suggests a process rather than a fixed idea or action, as “-ism” seems to insinuate. If evangelization is a process, I like to look at it as a process which goes beyond audio-communication only and includes a broader cultural base, with greater permanency.

Whether it is evangelism or evangelization, the offering of the gifts of a religion (in this case, I am referring to the Christian religion in the first instance because that is the religious tradition in which I have grown up) is made to those outside. In other words, a crossing of the boundary is involved: crossing the boundary of one religion to another religion, or crossing the boundary of faith to non-faith. In crossing the boundary, one meets another one, or one group meets another group. If there be communication, the spoken word is an immediate medium; there are also other media, including group activities and cultural phenomena. In any event, dialogue is an indispensable mode of communication for the evangelization process. However, I would like to think of dialogue in broader terms than just two individuals talking to each other; dialogue may involve groups or communities of people and it may take the form of written words too.

Let me now return to the experience of the dialogue series which forms the basis of this presentation. After one of the sessions, several of the listeners wanted to talk with me. It was already late and I had to rush back home. But the young people and I continued to talk as we walked to the bus station. What interested them was a new image of Christian beliefs I projected. I have forgotten what we discussed exactly, but when we parted, the young friends said that they wanted to know more about Christianity, and I invited them to come to our library next time and I would recommend some books to them to read first. One young man who has interest in Chinese philosophy did show up and, after a brief conversation, he borrowed a book, but he never returned. Two girls also called. They had some knowledge of Christian beliefs which they got from a fundamentalist church. I suggested they visit other churches or the church where I preach sometimes. But I have not seen them ever since. These experiences have made me realize that if dialogue has initiated religious quest, pastoral care is required to nurture growth. Alas! as the example I have given shows, I am limited in what I can do and I see that not many churches are equipped to help either.

My work really is more along the lines of cultural studies, writing and publishing, and so it is natural that I take a longer view of evangelization, especially in relation to inculturation. Let me turn now to the taped dis-

cussion on the topic “How to transcend death? Vision of the world beyond” to see if we can find some clues towards an answer to the question about evangelization.

Mr. Tong Tuan-cheng concentrated on the Confucian answer to the question, “How to transcend death?” He said that the Confucian attitude towards death is that the survival of the physical body is not important. Mortality in the sense of physical death is a fact which must be accepted. Medical science tells us that even while the body lives, practically all the cells in the human body are changed anew every seven years. So why be concerned about the perpetuation of the physical body, or of a single cell for that matter? Confucianism does not believe in a life beyond, nor does it posit another world next to this one. The Confucianist has a macro view of life and death. In terms of the temporal dimension, there were forebearers before us and there will be offsprings after us. That is why we remember the ancestors and see to it that the coming generations will carry on the family traditions. In doing so, we transcend our own existence.

Considered from the social dimension, morality and rites are important for community living and human relationships, and insofar as we live morally according to the *tao*, we transcend the individual’s lot, including finite existence and physical death. Traditionally, the Chinese people speak of the three ways of “immortality”: by living a virtuous life; by lasting achievement; by the written word. While it is true that death is a threshold to be faced, the cultivated person does not fear death, nor does such a person fear suffering in life. Finally, if we were to speak in metaphysical terms: “the good person is at one with the myriad things on earth and under heaven.” The Confucian sage transcends the limitations of the individual’s mortal existence by being in communion with all things from the beginning to the end.

Rev. Edward Chau understands and is in sympathy with Confucian teaching on life and death. But as a Catholic he gives a more definite status to the individual personality, not in and by itself, but in relation to the family and society and the Church, and certainly in relation to God. The individual person has to face the fact of physical death, but coupled with that is the fact of human sinfulness. The person of faith conquers sin and death and the fear of death and looks to communion with God in the heavenly realm. Fr. Chau explains the question of transcending death in terms of cultural re-transformation. His mentor, Archbishop Lo Kwang, likes the notion of *sheng-sheng chi-te* (the continuous re-creation of virtue) from the *I Ching*, and from it his Eminence develops a Christian philosophy of culture. Fr. Chau thinks along that line too, as he shows in his talk on

transcending death. In other words, death or finite existence is transcended in the process of cultural re-transformation. Cultural re-transformation includes the artistic, economic, moral, scientific and technological aspects; but underlying all is life (*sheng-ming*) rather than mere existence. Life is vital, heightened by consciousness, and is transmitted from person to persons. The Christian concept of “resurrection of life” comes in here too. It is the rebirth of life from moment to moment and from generation to generation.

The questions which followed the dialogue presentations showed that those present were impressed by the richness of both the Confucian and Christian teachings on life and death. One question asked was whether the “vision of the world beyond” was only a mental construct to make up for the incompleteness of life on earth. For instance, is *ta-t’ung* (grand unity) in Confucian teaching realizable? Mr. Tong’s answer is that *ta-t’ung* is both visionary and realizable. Rev. Chau’s response is that the kingdom of heaven is both eschatological and realizable now. That left the questioner with the feeling that there was still a lot to study and think about before a choice could be made.

Another person said that while impressed with the multi-dimensional teaching of Confucianism on life and mortality and its sense of history, he was also attracted to the Christian view which was rich in transcendence without denying the reality of this world.

The exchange of views on the topics shows that evangelization from the Christian side to the Chinese intelligentsia does not require a long process of inculturation before penetrating into Chinese thinking. From the Confucian side, it is not a question of “evangelization” as such since Confucian thought has long been part of the Chinese cultural heritage, though in reality, many Chinese people have to be re-educated in it. It may be true that the question of life and death is an existential question rather than an academic one, requiring more a leap of faith than a decision when confronted by the reality of death. Whether leap or decision, the person still needs to be informed about the teachings of one or more traditions on the subject and this is the role of evangelization.

In sum, the experience of the dialogue series shows that interreligious dialogue is both a natural as well as a necessary activity in a multi-religious world if communication among people involved in the religious traditions concerned is desired. If “evangelization” is a natural religious impulse, it is a process involving communication. This again underlines the important part played by interreligious dialogue. It should be added that it is never easy to separate religious beliefs from cultural elements. In this part of the

world certain religious traditions have already been interwoven into the cultural fabric. In the case of the Christian religion, it is less embedded in the Chinese cultural soil, and where evangelization is involved, a process of “inculturation” is called for. Such a process of inculturation again leads to encounter with religious beliefs other than the Christian faith. Here again interreligious dialogue is inevitable, and, at the risk of sounding redundant, interreligious dialogue is part of the inculturation process which is entailed in the task of evangelization.

Pathways to Faith Discussion and Response

The following is a paraphrased report on the response to Dr. Lee’s paper and the discussion which ensued. Comments are grouped by topic rather than the order in which they were made.

In his response to Dr. Lee’s paper, Dr. Cheng chose to comment on two issues; the Buddhist approach to *hung fa*; and the problem of suffering and death.

Taking first the question of death and how to transcend it, Dr. Cheng said that for Buddhists it was really a question of eliminating birth. The reason is that death is the consequence of birth. If there is no birth then there will be no death. Therefore all Buddhists try to avoid birth in order to avoid the suffering of death. But what does “to avoid birth” mean? It means to have a pure mind and this in turn means having no cravings, no habits, no ignorance. In other words, it means having no attachment to any external object. Thus, if there is no craving and no attachment after death, then there will be no rebirth.

According to Dr. Cheng, it is the notion of rebirth that determines the significant difference between Christian and Buddhist thinking on death and the hereafter. For the Buddhists, there is a continuous cycle of birth and death. It is highly unlikely that a person can achieve “no-birth” in just one cycle of life. If we cannot achieve “no-birth” in this life, we can do it in the next life, or other lives to come. This way of seeing things explains why Buddhists, when compared to Christians, are more relaxed, under no pressure and seem to be less positively active. It explains why there is not so much urgency for mission and teaching.

On suffering, Dr. Cheng did not find the “Suffering Servant Bodhisattva” image very useful. He explained that there was no servant-master concept in Buddhism. On the contrary, everybody and every sentient being is equal. As people, we are equal dogs, ants, birds and so on. We are different in outwardly ways but in our nature we are the same. We share the same consciousness, *tatha-tei*, or suchness to use Buddhist terminology. So even if the Bodhisattva tries to save others, it is not with the idea of considering oneself as a servant of others. It is more a case of this being the job of the Bodhisattva, done out of concern to relieve the suffering of others. In Buddhism, we use the word compassion rather than love. The idea is to put oneself in the position of other sentient beings in order to understand their feelings and needs. The Bodhisattva has the wisdom to see through the appearance and phenomenon of suffering. In the eyes of the Bodhisattva, happiness and suffering are merely conditions—we call them dependent origination. They are conditioned by many other factors. Therefore they are not real. The Bodhisattva has the wisdom to see this and is led by compassion to go back into the world to help others overcome their suffering.

Moving then to the topic of *hung tao* or *hung fa*, Dr. Cheng explained that *tao* is both the law of nature and also the way towards the goal or end which is perfection. If one does not realize what the *tao* is, he or she will suffer. If one goes against the law of nature, then one will also suffer. Once we are born, it is certain that we will die one day. Nobody can live forever. Birth leads to death. That is the law of nature. But people do not want to die, do not want to follow the law of nature; therefore they suffer. Without a cause there is no effect. Therefore eliminate the cause to eliminate death. Follow the law of nature in order to be free.

The *tao* is everywhere, waiting to be discovered by the enlightened mind. It is not owned by one; rather, it is shared by all. The *tao* that can be told is not the real *tao*. *Tao* cannot be taught or expounded or evangelized. It is already there and needs only to be realized. For these reasons, Buddhists do not set out to convert others to their faith. A statue of the Buddha, for example, is always very peaceful and calm. There is no anxiety to make everybody a Buddhist. Only if the seed of enlightenment is planted, then one day, when the conditions are right, will it grow and bear fruit. So, if it sometimes seems that Buddhists are too passive, inactive or relaxed, perhaps it is because they are waiting first for the conditions to be right, after which enlightenment will come.

In the discussion which followed Dr. Cheng’s response, attention first focused on what was termed as being “bilingual” in faith. An example

would be Buddhists who have studied and reached an understanding of Christianity such that they can speak or write with some familiarity about the other faith without doing it any injustice. A similar example could be given concerning Christians and Buddhists. In Japan, it was noted, such bilingualism exists on both sides and it helps to make dialogue natural and easy. In Korea, it is very rare. In Taiwan Buddhist monks do not have much interest in Christianity, although studies in comparative religions are being introduced in some Buddhist colleges. Perhaps it is that Buddhists already have so much to study in Buddhism that there is no more time left to study Christianity. However, more Christians have seriously studied Buddhism than vice versa and their writings are quite neutral and fair to Buddhism.

But how fair is fair? Can a Christian commenting on Buddhism really be objectively fair? Can a Buddhist doing the same on Christianity be objectively fair? The difficulty is that it is very hard to be aware of one's own prejudices. The objective stating of known facts may be possible, but once one enters the realm of interpretation, all kinds of hidden presuppositions come into play. In the end, the challenge of religious dialogue is to be able to formulate a statement about another person's faith in terms that are acceptable to that person. If we could reach that stage, then dialogue would flow very freely.

That, though, is just one way of dialogue, an academic one at that. Another equally important way is involvement with people of other faiths and backgrounds in the ordinary affairs of life; in dealing with day to day living. It means getting to know people on an inter-personal level; talking and sharing with them; working together on common issues. The "suchness" mentioned above can be realized in personal relationships, in the ordinary events in life. The transcendent is right in the midst of every event in life, every daily activity and thought. Suchness refers to the way things are in themselves, the way events occur. What often happens is that we impose our idea of reality on the situation. As one Zen master has said: "Your ordinary mind is none other than the *tao*."

At this point, the discussion came to a close, leaving many questions hanging, but perhaps providing direction and new ideas for subsequent discussion and exploration.