“What is the sound of liberating truth?” This is the question that Frederick Streng posed to Paul Ingram in Honolulu at the Sixth East-West Philosophers Conference just three years before his death. Streng described this question as his “life’s koan,” and two years later, made it public, going on to say that whatever form the solution to that koan might take, it must involve “ultimate transformation.” Streng was not interested in simple descriptions of reality or detached, diplomatic interreligious dialogue. Rather, as a historian of religions, he wanted to show that all religions have a transformative power at their core, and that this power lies at the heart of all human life. Streng advocated engaged interaction, conversation in community, but did not limit this interaction to one or two particular topics. Instead, he worked on a grander scale, encouraging dialogue in several different areas, each of which supported and informed the others. This book seeks to honor both his memory and his work by engaging in the multi-faceted, mutually transformative dialogue he sought all his life to engender.

The essays in this collection fall under five categories: Interreligious Dialogue, Ultimate Reality, Nature and Ecology, Social and Political Issues of Liberation, and Ultimate Transformation or Liberation. Each part consists of four chapters, written by two authors, one Buddhist and one Christian. Each author has written both an essay and a response to the other author’s essay. In this way, the book seeks to emulate Streng’s love of dialogue, providing not only different religious perspectives on a particular theme, but a genuine engagement as well. David Chappell and Winston King discuss the topic of interreligious dialogue. Bonnie Thurston and Malcolm David Eckel consider the concept of ultimate reality. Alan Sponberg and Paula Cooey reflect on nature and ecology. Sallie King and John Keenan exchange views on social and political issues of liberation. Thomas Kasulis and Ruben Habito review the idea of ultimate transformation or liberation. The book concludes with two epilogues, one by Taitetsu Unno and the other by John Cobb.

There are several main themes that run throughout the majority of the different essays, resurfacing at different points, refracted through a variety of lenses. Not surprisingly, given the nature of Streng’s work, one of the main concepts of the essays is emptiness. I found the various discussions...
of emptiness helpful, not for their depth, but for their breadth. The concept of emptiness is elaborated under the heading of ultimate reality, brought to bear on the Buddhist notion of ecology, discussed from a Christian perspective, and described both as a goal and a process. These varying interpretations are useful for getting a sense of the way in which the understanding of emptiness has developed over the course of time in various contexts.

Of course, the topic of interreligious dialogue is also at the forefront of all the essays, but what is of particular interest is the way in which methodology and boundaries are discussed. What I mean by this is the fact that in many of the essays, the conversation goes beyond discussion about this or that specific topic and treats the very structure of the dialogue itself. Different motives for dialogue, for both Christians and Buddhists are advanced, and, in some cases, the definition of what actually constitutes dialogue is challenged. For example, in David Chappell’s essay, “Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community,” he suggests three forms of dialogue: intellectual doctrinal discussion, joint religious practice, and joint social action. Winston King, however, in his essay, “Interreligious Dialogue,” endorses only the first as a legitimate form of dialogue, and by definition, concludes that almost exclusively, it will be the religious “professional” who will actually engage in dialogue, and even of them, only a few. This exchange is important because, in my experience, there is precious little of this type of self-reflection occurring among dialogue partners, and its absence is conspicuous. This fact makes the reflections on the act of interreligious dialogue found here of particular importance.

Another important aspect of the interreligious dialogue that occurs in this book is the foregrounding of the authors’ specific backgrounds and traditions. Often in interreligious dialogue, the talk is between some idealized form of Buddhism or Christianity that does not seem to have roots in any specific community. In these essays, the authors without exception take care to articulate their own particular faith communities and/or academic disciplines. For example, in her essay, “Creation, Redemption, and the Realization of the Material Order,” Paula Cooey makes it clear that she is speaking from a Reformed Protestant position, and uses her work on Jonathan Edwards to inform her stance. This assists the reader enormously in understanding her argument and enables us to concretize her point of view. From there, we are better equipped to either agree or disagree with her opinion, knowing we are making an informed decision either way.

As should be obvious, one of the great strengths of this book is the wide variety of authors who are represented here. For those readers who are new to the field of interreligious dialogue, this book provides an excellent introduction both to different scholars working in the area as well to different topics that are frequently discussed. However, this book is not
only for the beginner. Among the various authors, there is no across the board agreement on anything, and thus it is useful to see on which points the Buddhists and Christians disagree among themselves, and on which points they agree. There is no chance of being led astray by the single opinion of any one author, because there are so many other opinions on similar topics. As Paul Ingram mentions in the introduction, all the essays are, to a greater or lesser degree, interrelated, and the insights from one set of essays informs the discussion of all the others. The interplay allows the reader to see old ideas in a new light, familiar concepts filling different roles, and staid positions in fresh locations. In this way, this book is an asset for those seasoned scholars working in interreligious dialogue as well.

Lastly, a word about methodology. Clearly, there is no one method of dialogue that characterizes all of the essays, and the methodological diversity of the articles is another advantage of the book. I want to just mention a few of the most interesting approaches. John Keenan’s essay, “The Mind of Wisdom and Justice in the Letter of James,” is an excellent example of the “Buddhist exegesis” he has popularized in his earlier books, The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology, and The Gospel of Mark: A Mahāyāna Reading. Thomas Kasulis, in his essay, “Under the Bodhi Tree: An Idealized Paradigm of Buddhist Transformation and Liberation,” discusses the way in which the story of Gautama’s enlightenment functions as a “spiritual heuristic,” rather than a modus operandi. Finally, Alan Sponberg uses the Buddhist understanding of “self” to articulate a Buddhist position on ecology in his essay, “The Buddhist Conception of an Ecological Self.”

It is the rare book that lives up to the promise of its table of contents, but this is one book that, upon further exploration, does not disappoint. There are worthy talking points in each and every essay, and ideas of interest for both Buddhists and Christians alike. It is an honorable and estimable tribute to an influential, stimulating scholar, and we the readers are the ones who benefit from the contributors’ labor of love.


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This work is a record of the second Mind and Life Conference, held in 1989. These conferences are held once every two years and were initiated in response to the Dalai Lama’s lifelong interest in establishing a serious