

Some Thoughts on the Thought of Nishitani Keiji

RICHARD J. DEMARTINO

NISHITANI KEIJI was undoubtedly one of the most learned and fertile religiously oriented philosophical minds of the twentieth century. Very few thinkers were as well-versed as he in the overall thought of the East and the West, ancient and modern, regardless of whether the thought was religiously inclined, purporting to deal with science, or in some other manner avowedly secular. This intimate familiarity, moreover, was not as a rule derived from translations or secondary commentaries. It was, rather, the result primarily of his own close reading and study of original texts in their original languages. Nor was this learning or knowledge confined to non-fictional philosophical or religious writings. It extended as well to works of fiction, both prose and poetry. Furthermore, not only could he read fluently in German, French, and English, among other languages, he could also speak quite fluently in them—although, tending to be somewhat shy as well as modest, he was usually reluctant to do so.

For example, despite the fact that I already had the privilege to work with him for almost two years (from the fall of 1958 to the late spring of 1960) on English translations of his articles "What is Religion?"¹ and "Science and Zen,"² it was not until the late spring of 1960 that I really heard him "speak" in English. It occurred at a welcoming party (*kangei-kai*) held in Kyoto for Paul Tillich, who was, in May and June of 1960, visiting (and lecturing in) Japan as guest of the Japanese

¹ Keiji Nishitani, "What is Religion?" *Philosophical Studies of Japan*, II (1960), pp. 21–64.

² Keiji Nishitani, "Science and Zen," *Eastern Buddhist*, New Series, Vol. I, No. 1 (September 1965), pp. 79–108.

Ministry of Education. When it came time, at the Kyoto gathering, for Nishitani, widely acknowledged to be one of the doyens of Japanese—and especially Kyoto—scholars, to offer his greeting, he arose from his seat at the Western-style table, and, speaking in English, began: “While I think that I have the ‘courage to be,’ I am not at all sure that I have the ‘courage to speak in English,’ at least not publicly.” From whence he proceeded, in his characteristically slow but steady manner, to deliver in English a perfectly competent and charmingly engaging welcome.

Also worthy of note, I believe, is that he never paraded his massive accumulation of information and learning ostentatiously. Quite the reverse, it always made its presence felt inconspicuously in connection with a particular philosophical or religious point that he was trying to make either in his writing or in his teaching.

With respect to his teaching, besides his lecture courses, which were customarily attended by literally scores of students, his smaller classes were normally devoted to a rigorously careful reading and explication of a classical or germinal text by, for instance, Nishida, Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Hakuin, Dōgen, Descartes, Augustine, and the like. His wide-ranging scholarship regularly enabled him to come up with unusual and unexpected—but invariably appropriate—couplings or linkages to facilitate the elucidation, contrast, or comparison that he was after. For these several reasons, I feel assured that he can, with complete justification, be said to have been a truly global thinker.

Regarding his own personal religious and philosophical concerns, they eventually came to be centered chiefly around Zen Buddhism. This was a direct consequence of his agonizing struggle with his own personal or existential religious and philosophical problem: that of nihilism. For Nishitani, “Nihilism here means that something fundamental has been lost from our existence, and that all life has become ultimately meaningless.”³ Or, again, “Nihilism,” as he also terms it, refers to “a nothingness set in opposition to being, a *relative nothingness*,”⁴ “that which renders meaningless the meaning of life.”⁵

³ Keiji Nishitani, “The Religious Situation in Present-Day Japan,” *Contemporary Religions in Japan*, I, No. 1 (March 1960), p. 18.

⁴ Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated with an introduction by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

THE THOUGHT OF NISHITANI

As he was to reveal in a subsequent remembrance:

My life as a young man can be described in a single phrase: it was a period absolutely without hope. . . . My life at the time lay entirely in the grips of nihilism and despair. . . . My decision, then, to study philosophy was in fact—melodramatic as it might sound—a matter of life and death. . . .⁶

Searching for a way to deal with the threat of an ever-menacing destructive, relative, or negative⁷ nothingness that he saw hovering over—or underlying—human personal and historical existence, he began to consider that the possibility for a solution to this problem might be found in—or through—Zen Buddhism. Recalling his early questing, which included “his enthusiastic reading of Plotinus, Eckhart, Boehme, and the later Schelling”⁸ and “his avid readings of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, and Strindberg, as well as of Nietzsche,”⁹ Nishitani observed:

Before I began my philosophical training as a disciple of Nishida, I was most attracted by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, Emerson and Carlyle, and also by the Bible and St. Francis of Assisi. Among things Japanese, I liked best Natsume Sōseki and books like the Buddhist talks by Hakuin and Takuan. Throughout all these multiple interests, one fundamental concern was constantly at work, I think. . . . In the center of that whirlwind lurked doubt about the very existence of the self, something like the Buddhist “Great Doubt” or *daigi*. Thus I soon started paying attention to Zen.¹⁰

This interest in Zen did not interfere, but actually went along, with his philosophical interest—since both, in his view, had to do with the

⁶ Quoted from *ibid.*, Translator’s Introduction, p. xxxv.

⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 137–138.

⁸ See Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, translated by Graham Parkes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), fn. 15 to the Translator’s Introduction, p. 195.

⁹ See *ibid.*

¹⁰ Quoted from Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness*, translated by J. W. Heisig (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 50.

same problem of nihilism. Even when his thought matured, he continued to maintain:

I am convinced that the problem of nihilism lies at the root of the mutual aversion of religion and science. And it was this that gave my philosophical engagement its starting point from which it grew larger and larger until it came to envelop nearly everything.¹¹

This led him also to say: "The fundamental task for me, before philosophy and through philosophy, has been, in short, the overcoming of nihilism through nihilism."¹²

He finally discovered the resolution he sought to the problem of nihilism or of relative negativity (or of dualistic or relative nothingness) in what Buddhism—especially Zen Buddhism—refers to as non-dualistic or Absolute Nothingness,¹³ Absolute Negation,¹⁴ Absolute¹⁵ or True¹⁶ Emptiness, or, in Sanskrit, śūnyatā. In Nishitani's own phraseology: "The essence of nihility consists in a purely negative (antipodal) negativity."¹⁷ In sharp contrast, "śūnyatā represents the endpoint of an orientation to negation. It can be termed an *absolute negativity*, [absolute negation, or absolute nothingness], inasmuch as it is a standpoint that has negated and thereby transcended nihility. . . ."¹⁸

That is, "the standpoint of śūnyatā is . . . not a standpoint of simply negative negativity. . . . It is the standpoint at which absolute negation is at the same time . . . a Great Affirmation."¹⁹ For it is only "through the absolute negation of the self that takes place in the conversion from the field of nihility to the field of emptiness, and from the field of karma to the field of non-ego,"²⁰ that the self becomes a "true self . . . as that 'self that is not a self,' "²¹ or as "the self as non-ego."²² "In other words, without ceasing to be a human being, the self comes to a mode of being where it gets rid of the human. And that

¹¹ Quoted from *Religion and Nothingness*, Translator's Introduction, p. xxxvi.

¹² Quoted from *The Self-overcoming of Nihilism*, Notes, on Texts, p. xxx (a translation of Ueda Shizuteru's postscript to the latest Japanese edition of this work).

¹³ See *Religion and Nothingness*, pp. 95 and 126.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 35, 138, 158, 251, 263, and 280.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 123. ¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 183. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 263. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183. ²² *Ibid.*

mode is none other than Existenz as non-ego, the Existenz of the 'non-duality of self and other,' ²³ or the non-duality of self and not-self. This, then, is "the field of the absolute negation or Great Death of the self . . . where 'we become dead while living,' ²⁴ "the standpoint of death and rebirth implied in the phrase, 'In the Great Death heaven and earth become new.' ²⁵ Accordingly, "the field of śūnyatā is nothing other than the field of the Great Affirmation"²⁶—or, in an alternate, equivalent²⁷ characterization, "is the field of an absolute 'nothingness,' ²⁸ "a nothingness altogether beyond the field of the relativity [or dualistic opposition] of being and nothingness."²⁹

Relating śūnyatā ("emptiness"—or "true emptiness") to its companion Buddhist term *tathatā* ("suchness"—or *bhūta-tathatā*, "true suchness"), Nishitani wrote: "It is precisely on the field of śūnyatā that . . . phenomena, at one with emptiness, are nothing less than actual reality at an essential level. It is what we [can also] speak of . . . as 'true suchness'. . . ."³⁰ For him, therefore:

True emptiness is nothing less than what reaches awareness in all of us as our own absolute *self-nature*. In addition, this emptiness is the point at which each and every entity that is said to exist becomes manifest as what it is in itself, in the Form of its true suchness.³¹

When expressed conceptually or "in thought," these matters bespeak a kind of thought that points beyond the pale of thought that is "not [to be] contemplated on the field of reason, but . . . comprehended [or prehended] on the field of śūnyatā."³² And, in fact, this may be taken to be a mark of much of Nishitani's own thought or thinking.

Abe Masao, a former student of Nishitani and now a leading member of the Kyoto School, commenting on Nishitani's book *Shūkyō to wa nanika?* (published first in 1961 in Japanese and then again, in 1982, in an English translation under the title *Religion and Nothingness*) said to me shortly after its Japanese publication: "It is

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 33 and 127.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

two steps ahead of Heidegger!" While this, no doubt, is true, I would add that in a significant sense it stands on a slightly different footing. For it is an attempt to canvas and to explore a number of the most basic religious and philosophical problems inherent in human existence through, as already intimated, an open and explicit marshalling of—and grappling with—some of the best thinking in this regard appearing in both the West and East. In Nishitani's own articulation: "My aim is . . . to inquire into the original form of reality, and of man who is part of that reality, including as well the antireligious and antiphilosophical standpoints of which the nihilism of Nietzsche and the scientism found in secularization are examples."³³ Hence, it is an intense reflection upon a genuinely cross-cultural inquiry that undergirds the uncompromising universality claimed in the concluding pronouncement of this work:

True freedom is . . . an absolute autonomy on the field of emptiness, where "there is nothing to rely on." And this is no different from making oneself into a nothingness in the service of all things. . . . Only on the field of emptiness does all . . . this become possible. Until the thoughts and deeds of man one and all be located on such a field, the sorts of problems that beset humanity have no chance of ever really being solved.³⁴

Long-term prophecy, it goes without saying, is always extremely hazardous. Nevertheless, I think it can be said with a high degree of probability that like his renowned teacher Nishida Kitarō, the founder of the so-called Kyoto School (of which Nishitani was the recent ranking representative), Nishitani's voice, though it may take a little time to be heard, recognized, and fully savored, will remain down through the ages a veritably distinctive voice in the ongoing collective religio-philosophical chorus of all human-kind.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 261. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

THE THOUGHT OF NISHITANI

starting with
the negative
relative
or dualistic
nothingness
of nihilism
a cognitive probing
into and through
nihilism's root-source
to its conclusive
over-coming
in the True Emptiness
of non-relative
non-dualistic
or Absolute Nothingness
an existentially charged
intellectual odyssey
spanning East and West
ancient and modern
pointing beyond
even itself
the thought-arresting-thought
of Nishitani Keiji
philosopher
of Zen Buddhism