

## Remembering Sensei

Hans Waldenfels

Professor Nishitani Keiji was one of the few teachers who made a deep and lasting impression on my thought and my life, and I am saddened by the news of his passing. I well remember the circumstances leading to my first encounter with him. During the summer of 1963, I believe it was, the late Father Pedro Arrupe, then provincial superior of the Japanese province of the Society of Jesus (SJ), discussed with me plans to further my studies and my future work. He intended to send me to Rome to complete my doctoral studies in systematic theology, but he advised me not to go immediately to Rome but to stay in Japan to study for some time at a university of my choice. After hurried consultation with some Japanese friends, I learned from Seto Katsusuke, a Jesuit later acclaimed for his work in the field of the spiritual education of young Japanese Jesuits, of a book that had only recently appeared: Professor Nishitani's *Shūkyō to wa nanika*. I got the book, started reading it, and had not even gotten finished with it when I decided this would be the teacher with whom I wanted to study.

But how does one get in contact with such a famous person? It would be easy enough to obtain his address, but I could not bring myself to write a letter or pay a visit to him without a proper introduction. There was, however, a man who knew Professor Nishitani personally: Professor Joseph Roggendorf of Sophia University. I remember how amazed I was when Father Roggendorf, instead of sitting down and writing a letter of recommendation, merely whipped out one of his tiny *meishi* (name cards), put Nishitani Sensei's name on it and added: "*Yoroshiku.*"

On my way to Hiroshima, I stopped in Kyoto and asked friends at the Thomas Gakuin to make me an appointment with Professor Nishitani. The next morning I visited Sensei at his house. He cordially welcomed me and ushered me into his study where we sat down and talked. Conversing in Japanese, I expressed my desire to study under his guidance, but his answer was not what I expected. He said he had just retired from Kyoto University and was now teaching at Ōtani University, and so he strongly recommended I attend the seminar of his successor, Professor Takeuchi Yoshinori. Today I have not the least regret that I studied under Takeuchi's direction, for he too became a true sensei for me to whom I feel deeply indebted. But at that mo-

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ment I was shocked by Nishitani Sensei's apparent refusal. He was not even willing to allow me to attend his classes at Ōtani because, as he pointed out, the classes were for beginners, not for people who had finished their graduate studies in theology.

The conversation then shifted to his forthcoming trip to Europe. He asked me about Germany, about Catholic theology and Catholic authors. Spontaneously I mentioned Karl Rahner, a name which at that time was evidently unknown in Kyoto circles; at least Nishitani seemed not to have heard of him. I urged him to get in contact with Rahner in Munich (which he subsequently tried to do, though at that time unsuccessfully). Before I left, I asked him for permission to see him again the next time I came to Kyoto.

Profoundly disappointed with the results of the meeting, I returned to my friends at Thomas Gakuin where I related what happened. Their response to my account ended with a sort of *aha!* satori-experience on my part. For the first time I realized that understanding in a foreign language has nothing to do with correctness of grammar, vocabulary and syntax. Speaking and understanding can be two different things, as it was in my case. After all, Sensei had spoken in Japanese, I had spoken in Japanese, and even my account to my friends was given in Japanese. But the fact is I had come away not understanding the most basic thing he was telling me. I did not see the light until one of Father Pouliot's Japanese colleagues asked me: "So what more do you want? Sensei gave you advice as to what to do, and so he has in effect accepted you as a disciple. Now get along and do what he told you!" In fact, that and that alone was the entire result of our encounter!

During the winter semester of 1964-65 and the summer semester of 1965 I was enrolled as a guest student at the Philosophy Department of Kyoto University. I attended the lectures of Professor Takeuchi, and was a member of his seminars and colloquies. At the same time I also went to Ōtani University to attend Professor Nishitani's lectures. It was not only a time of intellectual enrichment but even more, of rich personal life experience.

One day I got a call from one of Nishitani's disciples. He told me that Sensei had meetings with a group of his former students at the University every fortnight to read and discuss the texts of Rhenish mystics. Sensei had invited me to join the group and to participate in their discussion. Thus I became a member of Nishitani's circle of disciples and friends, mostly younger professors and scholars who had yet to make a name for themselves—among them Tsujimura Kōichi, Mutō Kazuo, Ueda Shizuteru and Abe Masao. Every time the session began with the exposition of a special topic regarding certain mystical texts which to a great extent were read in Middle High-German. Sensei usually listened with eyes closed, as if shut off from the world and totally turned inside himself. But there were two things that indicated he was fully

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awake. First, he chain-smoked, one cigarette after the other. Second, once in a while it happened that someone would make a mistake, and all of a sudden Sensei would interrupt him by correcting the Middle High-German quotation from Tauler or Meister Eckhart or somebody else which he knew by heart.

During one meeting Sensei cut short perhaps the earliest dispute I had with Ueda Shizuteru. Before I was about to leave Kyoto for Rome, Sensei invited me to contribute to the discussion. I spoke that evening about listening and seeing, about the old Greek understanding of *Sein* which is generally thought of in terms of seeing, and less frequently in terms of listening. Ueda—not unjustly—interpreted my explanation as an allusion to the basic difference between Buddhism and Christianity, although I had made no explicit mention of it. Nevertheless, *seeing* seemed to lead into a complete unity, even to an identity of the seer (the seeing subject) and the seen (the object seen) beyond any personal I-Thou-relationship and thus into the world of All-One-mysticism, as it is known in Asia. On the other hand, *listening* finds its perfect form in the realm of personal encounter between the listener and the speaker—an experience fully realized in the Christian understanding of God Triune and aspired to in the way of human communication. When we started to get embroiled in a discussion of the superiority of one standpoint over the other, Sensei suddenly interrupted us, saying in his matchless way: “Leave God and man aside! Take only two human beings who love each other like man and wife. They are sitting together in the same room. Both preoccupied with their own jobs, they utter not a single word to one another, and yet they understand each other perfectly. What else is the *visio beatifica*, the beatific *vision*?”

Most probably I would never have had the courage to write my book *Absolutes Nichts* had it not been for the experience of living at least a short time with Sensei as one of his disciples. From that time on, whenever I was listening to him or in the conversations with him, I felt that this man was more than just a professor or a teacher; he truly was a *Sensei*. In German, he would have been called a person who *vor-lebt* and *vor-macht*, that is, who sets an example for us by his way of life, who shows us how to make our way by manifesting that way himself. Precisely in this sense he has become my *sen-sei*.

What I experienced during that short year's stay in Kyoto was deepened by encounters with Sensei in ensuing years—in Nagoya when Jan Van Bragt invited me for a conference dealing with “Absolute Nothingness and God” in 1980, in Kyoto during the Second Kyoto Zen Symposium in 1984, and one last time when I paid Sensei a visit in August 1988. I shall forego discussing any of these meetings in any detail, but I would like to mention some of the points which I learnt from his way of life which he himself used to describe as the way of the *werdend geworden* Buddhist and the *werdend werdender* Christian.

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Nishitani Sensei was a person who had deeply explored and critically diagnosed the trends of our times in a way few of his contemporaries had ever done. In the last decades of his life he turned, or rather returned, with great interest to the sources of Asian spiritual life, especially to Zen Buddhism in its literary form. He edited and interpreted some of the well-known source materials of that tradition. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that the second volume of his collected essays on religion—following *Shūkyō to wa nanika*—should contain *Zen no tachiba*, 'The Standpoint of Zen'.

His return to a more genuinely Buddhist standpoint, however, should not prevent us from recalling his deep insights into the Christian teachings. I am somewhat saddened to report that the ongoing discussion on Buddhist *śūnyatā* and Christian *kenosis* taking place in the United States right now has failed to recognize Nishitani Sensei's fundamental contribution to the dialogue. After all, it was his understanding of *śūnyatā* and its comparison with God's emptiness—as it appears, according to St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians Ch. 2, in the life and death of Jesus Christ—which combined speculative thought with an ethical drive in a unique way. I learned from Nishitani Sensei that *anātman* (Jap. *muga*) in its full meaning is only partly comprehended by translating it into English as *not-self* or *non-ego*, and that it reaches its full realization only where it turns into the central mode of life, where *not-self* becomes *selflessness*. It is precisely God's self-emptying which leads to the understanding of divine love, just as it is the realization of Wisdom expressed in emptiness which marks the realization of Compassion at once (cf. *Shūkyō to wa nanika*, Ch. 2: III; see my comments in: *Absolute Nothingness*, Ch. III: 9–10).

I would predict that the Buddhist-Christian encounter will reach its true point of convergence when the condition of self-forgetfulness is fulfilled, where people of both traditions meet in a practice of self-denial and self-surrender in service of all those who stumble blindly along the road whose end they do not know. It is a moving testimony that Nishitani Sensei should close his internationally best known and interreligiously most influential work, *What is Religion?*, by referring not to a Buddhist personality which he easily could have done, but to St. Francis of Assisi. Sensei recalls the story of St. Francis who, when he was about to have an infected eye cauterized, turned and addressed the cautery and made the sign of the cross over the cauterizing iron, thus tempering the heat so that he would be able to withstand it. Sensei then added his own view of the matter:

Could it not be that the sign of the cross made over the relationship between oneself and other, signals the opening up of a field where self and others are bound together in divine *agape*, where both are

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made into nothingness and 'emptied out', and that this is where the encounter with others takes place? Does not the sign of the cross take on the significance of a blessing because in loving others 'as oneself' in Christ, all men become one's brothers and sisters?

Only then does Nishitani Sensei introduce a Japanese saying which gives witness to the experience of St. Francis:

Once you annihilate the mind, even the burning fire is cool."

There is one more point I would like to call the reader's attention to, lest it be forgotten. To describe the mutual relationship existing between St. Francis and the fire, Nishitani coined the word "*egoteki kankei*," which has been rendered into English as "circumincessional relationship" by translator Jan Van Bragt who settled on this term only after long discussions with Sensei. When I asked Sensei about the origin of the Japanese term, he clearly stated that an erudite Japanese would recognize that *ego* is a Zen term meaning "back-and-forth round one another." On the other hand, *circumincessional* stems from the Christian theology of God's Trinity. The fact is that what Nishitani means by *egoteki kankei* is elucidated in Japanese through the use of a linguistic form from the Zen Buddhist tradition, whereas it is rendered in English through the use of a linguistic form borrowed from the Christian tradition. As such it comes to settle in a sort of no-man's-land between Buddhism and Christianity. This creates a delicate situation which, granted, is still in need of further clarification, but it is noteworthy that the encounter the term manifests could lead to a greater degree of convergence than human reflection and conceptualization is ready to admit.

Indeed, it is only where the great koan of the Great Death is solved that life comes to be fulfilled. For Nishitani Sensei it was the field of emptiness where all the problems that beset humanity have a chance of truly being solved. Surely this is why he would smile upon the world in wisdom and compassion.