

BOOK REVIEWS

On Buddhism. By Nishitani Keiji. Trans. by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. xi + 175 pages. Paperback \$19.95.

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Nishitani Keiji established his philosophical reputation abroad with his masterful *Religion and Nothingness*, which still stands as a landmark in modern Japanese philosophy of religion and as a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity. *On Buddhism*, the latest of his works to be translated into English, takes up the question of the relationship of Buddhism to the contemporary world. Although the book's light and easy-to-read style makes it valuable as an introduction to Nishitani's later thought, as an experiment in revitalizing a number of traditional Buddhist ideas by bringing them face to face with real problems in the contemporary world, it requires at least a general understanding of Buddhist thought and its role in Japanese society.

On Buddhism is the compilation of three essays based on transcripts from lectures originally delivered to Daichi no Kai (a Shin Buddhist organization that sponsored regular lecture series) in 1972 and 1974, which were subsequently published in 1982 and then later incorporated into Nishitani's Collected Writings. The English translation includes a foreword by Jan Van Bragt, translator of *Religion and Nothingness* and a long-time acquaintance of Nishitani, as well as a helpful introduction by Robert E. Carter, whose name is widely known among students of Japanese philosophy in the English-language world.

As those who have heard Nishitani lecture will attest, his public presentations, although carefully structured, were often repetitive and given to extemporaneous flashes of inspiration as he slowly spiraled his way around the topic in an attempt to draw his listeners into his own search for coherent understanding. This same quality is reflected in these pages and, even if the content is not academically demanding, requires a certain patience of the reader. In this regard, the introductory material is indispensable for attuning oneself to Nishitani's style.

Each of the three essays of the volume—"On What I Think about Buddhism," "On the Modernization of Buddhism," and "On Conscience"—is divided into two chapters. The English translators have further introduced subheadings for the convenience of the reader.

In the first essay, Nishitani criticizes two aspects of religion while maintaining respect for them. First, there is the contemporary situation of established religions, including Christianity, with their strong collective spirit and typically closed attitudes. In particular, he notes a serious discrepancy between the open dynamism of sacred texts like the *Tannishō* and the Bible on the one hand, and the attachment to ritual and dogma on the other. Nishitani insists on giving precedence to "religious persons" (p. 29) over affiliation with a particular religious establishment.

Second, though not as forcefully, Nishitani criticizes the distance of religious studies from real life. The interpretation of sacred texts must be freed from the domination of academia and restored to the existential viewpoint of those engaged in "the attempt to grasp genuine meaning in the midst of really living our own lives" (p. 27). In the end, he insists, the important thing is to live out our lives to the full, with all their contradictions, and try to shape our identity to the ideal we carry within us. In doing so, the clergy need to bear in mind Shinran's well-known phrase *hisō hizoku* (neither clerical nor lay) just as the laity need to find a standpoint that is "nonclergy and nonlaity" (p. 33).

The concluding section of the first essay centers on "historical consciousness." Nishitani makes the bold claim that unlike its Asian neighbors, modern Japan had a genius for taking tradition seriously in its attempt to digest Western culture, a view that seems to echo, even if in somewhat softer terms, the rather questionable views he expressed in the notorious *Chūōkōron* discussions of 1941 and 1942. Here, however, he applies this ideal to the historical consciousness of Buddhism and finds it wanting. In particular, Buddhism's overemphasis on the transience of this temporal world has weakened its will for historical change and social improvement, almost as if Buddhist ethics had left such questions to other religions like Confucianism (pp. 49–50). Nishitani tries to find a way out of this malaise by turning to the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther's stress on "faith alone." This idea, Nishitani argues, can prove a useful model for returning to the realities of the historical world (p. 60). Granted Christianity's superior sense of historicity, it seems nevertheless to have passed over the role of worldly knowledge as a meeting point for the divine and the human, and as a result to have failed to see through its own self-centeredness (p. 64). For Buddhism today, the mere importation of abstract

theological concepts is hardly a remedy for the historical consciousness that it seems to have in such short supply. Instead Nishitani hints at the importance of images of *do* (earth), to which he returns in the final essay.

The second essay takes up the question of historicity in more detail, treating it under the rubric of “modernization.” Concretely, historicity is approached from the perspective of Buddhism’s need to develop its idea of ethics. In other words, he sees the task for Japanese Buddhism as grappling with “the problem of the other” in a tradition that has long concentrated on the pursuit of a true self. Nishitani seeks to resolve the contradiction by opening up the notion of *muga* or “no-selfhood” to a “discourse—that is, an open-mindedness—that can be appropriately described in terms of other-centeredness instead of ego-centeredness” (p. 79). His point is not that the self is to be taken over by others. Rather, our physical bodies cannot be reduced to mere matter but share an affinity with mind as if with “something hidden” (p. 82) and this affinity provides the ground of our relationship to others.

Thus, although the modernization of Buddhism begins from self-understanding which is the task of the individual, it needs to incorporate an ethical dimension rooted in essential human relations. In other words, the securing of individuality “the knowledge of which can be acquired only by oneself, while others cannot share in it” (p. 93), is only the first step. The next step, toward the “other,” is expressed in the Oriental tradition as an immanence that cannot be kept secret but of its very nature assumes a religious form within the awakening to the idea that “Heaven knows” (p. 94).

The third essay continues the expansion of this hidden, secret dimension by taking up the question of conscience. Conscience belongs to mind, or in its more original term, *kokoro*. As such, it does not stop where the Western, psychological notion of “conscience” does, but opens up to the idea of a “Buddha-mind” that is present not only in human beings but in all things. As a consequence, ethics is not limited to relationships among people but belongs to an “authentic path” (p. 114) leading to the depths of an all-embracing Buddha-mind. At the same time, Nishitani recognizes that “there is some difference between human beings and animals, and that from the outset it is insufficient for a being to be a mere human being alone,” and that therefore “each of us must do our utmost, or take pains to achieve this end” (p. 114). It is a matter of our constitution that only by exerting our humanity to the full can we be truly human. This process goes hand in hand with ethics, so that “it is not only the case that we ourselves become so, but we also render other persons capable of becoming truly human as well” (p. 115). Awakening to the transcendence of

“Heaven knows” is much the same way as a relationship between a carpenter and his work. “If someone wishes to see him, . . . ‘look at this house’.” The carpenter intuitively knows that “he is one with the house and the house is one with him” (p. 127). For Nishitani, the discipline of being a carpenter can bring one to an awareness of conscience.

In applying this idea to Buddhism, exhibitionism is to be carefully avoided. Those who walk the Buddhist path, Nishitani insists, hide themselves, for it is in dying to themselves that their followers, grieving over the loss, awaken to the magnificence of Buddha. Nishitani concludes that this kind of awakening is a way to overcome nihilism, not only for Buddhism but also for Christianity.

Such, in a broad outline, is the argument of *On Buddhism*. To put it simply, it is a book about the certainty and superiority of non-discriminating wisdom. Although much of the usual technical vocabulary of Kyoto-school philosophizing is absent, it is present between the lines. For example, behind the phrase “the manner in which a thing turns out to be itself is one in which the self and a thing are brought to self awareness as united into one” (p. 140) it is not hard to see Nishida’s notion of “action-intuition” at work. In this sense, *On Buddhism* is a good way for those interested in knowing more about the larger philosophical tradition to which Nishitani belongs to get their feet wet without having to battle the tall waves of the full intellectual ocean.

Moreover, although this is primarily a book about Buddhism, Nishitani’s long-standing engagement in the interreligious dialogue with Christianity and his attempts to forge a standpoint from which to integrate these two major religions are in evidence throughout. As always, Nishitani’s take on Christianity is shaped by his own Buddhist leanings, and yet the “Buddhism” one finds here is distinguished by the fact that it has been thought out in the light of Christianity and other religions. In this sense, it may not be the best introduction to traditional Buddhist doctrine.

Set against the backdrop of Nishitani’s later writings, the essays in the book can be read as a foretaste of the kinds of questions he was to take up later. In particular, one thinks of his final piece “Emptiness and Sameness,”¹ which has been attracting more and more attention among scholars in recent years. Conceived as a talk for a general Shin Buddhist audience, this book walks the solid earth of the Pure Land, leaving Zen speculations on the empty sky of *śūnyatā*

¹ This article is translated in Michele Marra, *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999.

for another time. This was Nishitani's gift, as Hase Shōtō reminds us: to inherit all the riches Buddhism has to offer in the search for wisdom.²

Lacking the credentials of a native speaker, I hesitate to comment on the quality of the English translation, though I must say I find it reminiscent of Nishitani's engaging, narrative style. At the same time, I was struck occasionally by what seemed to me unnecessary forfeitures of nuance due to a limited English vocabulary. For example, where the English has "the study of dogma" (p. 28) in contrast with a participation in ritual, the Japanese has *kyōgaku*, which is closer to religious instruction or catechism than it is to an academic specialization or churchly self-righteous authority. Laying the original and the translation side by side, one notices numerous places where this largely literal translation limps along syntactically, landing itself time and again in unnatural and inaccurate expressions. This is clear already from the titles of the essays and the handful of passages cited earlier in this review. And then, there are the errors in romanization and diacritical marks. Still, through it all, the creative, even playful, mind that made Nishitani one of the philosophers most beloved by modern Japanese Buddhist scholars shines bright and unclouded by the shift from one culture and language to another.

Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism. By Ugo Dessì. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007. 272 pages. Paperback €39.90.

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This is the first book-length account of contemporary Shin Buddhist ethics in English. It describes the ethical thought of numerous modern scholars of the Shin school (mainly from the Ōtani-ha and Honganji-ha), as well as the activities of contemporary activists who struggle against war and discrimination, and for peace and social welfare. It is a unique mixture of textual analysis with primary data gathered through fieldwork and participant observation. Until the publication of Dessì's study, most scholarship on Shin ethics in English con-

² See Hase Shōtō 長谷正當, "Kū to jōdo: Do ni okeru chōetsu" 空と浄土: 土における超越. In *Yokubō no tetsugaku: Jōdokyō sekai no shisaku* 欲望の哲学: 浄土教世界の思索. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2003.