

NOTES

NISHITANI KEIJI 1900-1990

On November 24, 1990, Nishitani Keiji, chief editor of the *Eastern Buddhist*, passed away at his Kyoto home. He passed into death in the same way he had lived his life, gently and quietly. For him, life and death were not two, but one.

Nishitani Sensei was born February 27, 1900, in a small village on the Noto Peninsula facing the Japan Sea. At the age of six, the family moved to Tokyo. When he was fifteen, his father died of tuberculosis. He himself contracted the disease, and was forced to give up, temporarily, his ambition of entering the Higher School, despite his excellent school record. These painful experiences brought him face to face with the fundamental problems of human existence. He later confessed:

At that time the events taking place in my life filled me with despair. I was gripped at the depths of my being by a sense of utter hopelessness. Everything appeared empty and meaningless. My mind was swept by a bleak wind. Being consumed by such feelings myself, it was not difficult for me to recognize a kindred voice in the works of Natsume Sōseki.¹ Yet I came to realize that the only way I would be able to overcome my suffering and despair would be to transcend worldly life. (*Collected Works*, vol. 9)

Later, Nishitani would refer to this in his writings as *dattei no jikaku* 脱底の自覚, "the realization of the bottomlessness" at the root-source of human life, in which one finds that there is no place where one can plant one's feet; rather, life is life because its fundamental basis is without basis.

Referring to the "starting point" of his own philosophy, he wrote, "If I try to express it, I can find no other word than 'nihilism.'"² But to Nishitani, this is not a nihilistic state or mode, but "something which is prior to philosophy

¹ Natsume Sōseki, the Meiji period novelist whose struggle with the conflict between the modern ego-consciousness and traditional Japanese morality is reflected in his fiction.

² "The Starting Point of My Philosophy," *FAS Society Journal*, Spring 1986, p. 24.

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and at the same time includes essentially a move towards a philosophical dimension."³ His entire philosophical career may be viewed as a pursuing of this pre-philosophical nihilism to its final conclusion. In his own words,

The fundamental direction of my inquiry began with a philosophical explication of the nihilistic standpoint itself; it went on to make a philosophical and critical investigation into the problems of ethics and religion, and led finally through nihilism to seek ways to overcome it. These three strands were entwined naturally into one. (vol. 9, p. 27)

In 1921, Nishitani Sensei enrolled as a student in the department of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University and began his study under the guidance of Nishida Kitarō. He chose philosophy because in his days at the Higher School, in the midst of his despair, he had been deeply moved and given much-needed strength by reading Nishida's *Shisaku to Taiken* ("Contemplation and Experience"). Nishida became his teacher not only in an academic sense but as a revered, life-long mentor. It was thus only natural that Nishitani later became the true successor to Nishida's philosophy. As for his own philosophical investigations, he tells us,

First, I undertook to study the problem of evil. My concern was not so much the evil that appears upon individual self-reflection as the evil that appears in human nature as such. As I studied German idealism, I found that the problem of original sin always remained. By tracing it, I finally reached the later Schelling's concept of freedom. (*ibid.*, p. 28)

Nishitani Sensei's first philosophical article appeared in 1924, in the journal *Tetsugaku Kenkyū* (Philosophical Studies). It was "A Study of the Real and Ideal in Schelling's Identity Philosophy. It was the first in a long and impressive list of books and articles, including "*Shimpi shisō shi*" ("A History of Mystical Thought") 1932, *Kongen-teki shutaisei no tetsugaku* (The Philosophy of Fundamental Subjectivity) 1940, *Kami to zettai mu* (God and Absolute Nothingness) 1948, *Arisutoteresu ronkō* (Studies in Aristotle) 1948, *Nihirizumu* (Nihilism) 1949, *Gendai shakai no shomondai to shūkyō* (Religion and Social Problems in the Modern Age) 1951, *Shūkyō to wa nani ka* (What is Religion?) 1961, a collection of essays on Japanese and Buddhist culture titled *Kaze no kokoro* (Mind of Wind) and *Zen no tachiba* (The Standpoint of Zen), both 1986. These and other works were collected and published in an edition of his works which appeared in thirteen volumes between 1986-7 (*Nishitani Keiji Chosaku shū* (Collected Works of Nishitani Keiji, First Series). A second series, consisting of the records of lectures he gave at Kyoto Univer-

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sity, Otani University, and other institutions over a period of four decades began appearing in 1990 and will, when complete, fill thirteen additional volumes.

A number of these writings have been translated. Among them are his major work *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (What is Religion?), which originally appeared serially in the *Eastern Buddhist*, 1970–1980, and later was revised and published in book form in English (*Religion and Nothingness*, 1982), and German (*Was ist Religion?* 1982). In 1990, a translation of *Nihirizumu* (Nihilism) appeared under the title *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, followed by a collection of his essays on his teacher Nishida Kitarō (*Nishida Kitarō*, 1991). As early as 1976, a study of “Absolute Nothingness” based on Nishitani’s understanding of Śūnyatā appeared in the West: the German theologian Hans Waldenfels’ *Absolutes Nichts—Zur Grundlegung des Dialogs Zwischen Buddhismus and Christentum*; later translated into English as *Absolute Nothingness*.

Nishitani became a full-time member of the faculty of letters of Kyoto Imperial University in 1932. He was made associate professor in 1935, and full professor in 1943. In 1937–39, as a research-fellow of the Ministry of Education, he studied at Freiburg University under Martin Heidegger. He received a degree of Doctor of Letters (D. Litt) in 1945. Following World War II, he was retired from the university for six years; he rejoined the faculty in 1952 and served as Professor of Philosophy and Religion until his retirement in 1963.

Nishitani Sensei remained continually active after he left Kyoto University. He taught at Otani University (1963–1971) and was a visiting professor at Hamburg University (1964) and Temple University (1969). In 1965, he was elected to the Japan Academy. At about the same time, he became editor of the *Eastern Buddhist* (New Series). In 1972, he was awarded the prestigious Goethe Gold Prize by the Goethe Institute of West Germany. In 1982, he received the Award for Cultural Merit (*Bunka Kōrōsha*) from the Japanese government.

It was shortly after entering Kyoto University in 1942 that I first met Nishitani Sensei, three years after his return from Germany. I learned much from him over the next forty years. It is difficult for me to express the extent of my indebtedness and gratitude to him. I encountered two great teachers at Kyoto University, Hisamatsu Shin’ichi and Nishitani Keiji. They were in many ways opposites, although both of them were thinkers and practitioners with deep roots in Zen experience.

Hisamatsu Sensei was like a steep peak. He emphasized strictly the “awakening to the formless self.” He criticized Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism as religions of faith which had not yet penetrated thoroughly to ultimate reality. Nishitani Sensei, on the other hand, was like a great ocean,

comprehending various philosophical and religious traditions from within, grasping them at their deepest point and in their most essential form from the standpoint of "Emptiness." It was not merely an uncritical acceptance of these traditions, however; it was an attempt to instill new life in them through penetrating insight.

I received training, nourishment, and inspiration from these two men for close to half a century. From Hisamatsu Sensei I received the "bones" or basic structure of my own religious standpoint. From Nishitani Sensei I received the "flesh and blood." It is Nishitani who nourished me with his rich understanding of Western philosophy and Buddhism.

In addition to many authoritative writings on Buddhism, Zen, and Eastern culture, his studies of the great Western figures such as Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Eckhart, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger reveal the extraordinary depth and breadth with which he grasped European philosophy and thought. Moreover, his approach to these philosophers is deeply rooted in his concern with the opening up of a new spiritual horizon through the confrontation between Western and Eastern (Buddhist) spirituality. This goes beyond an attempt merely to synthesize Western and Eastern spiritual traditions; it endeavors to establish a new spiritual foundation for authentic human existence which transcends the distinction between East and West. In this context, we should be reminded once again that all of his philosophical thinking derives from the realization of nihilism and the overcoming of that nihilism from within. Science and religion, another important issue for Nishitani, also came into play in this context, because he believed firmly that the mutual antagonism between religion and science cannot be solved unless nihilism is overcome.

After a long and rigorous philosophical journey, Nishitani arrived at the standpoint of Śūnyatā (Emptiness). Although the term originates in Buddhist thought, Nishitani does not understand it as something unique to Buddhism. He uses the term Śūnyatā apart from the framework of its traditional conceptual determination and suggests correlations with concepts of contemporary philosophy (*Religion and Nothingness*, p. xlix). In reality, Śūnyatā thus becomes an all-inclusive and totally original position in which the problem of overcoming nihilism is resolved.

In encountering the sad event of Nishitani Keiji's death, there is consolation in the belief that, with the approach of the global age, he will continue to live in his thought and writings, and they will come to play an increasingly significant role in the future development of human thought.

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