and happened upon a wooden statue of [the nembutsu teacher] Ippen Shōnin at Hōgonji Temple. Having often heard Hisamatsu Sensei's criticism of Pure Land Buddhism, I was anxious to see what he would do in front of the statue of Ippen. In the back of my mind I expected him to take a shot at Ippen. With bated breath, I watched Sensei from behind. His hands pressed together before him, he stood for a while several meters from the statue. Suddenly, he uttered, "*NAMU AMIDA BUTSU*"—words which struck my ears like a hundred peals of thunder. I had wrapped myself up in my smug little concerns, which were in that instant completely swept away.

It was not this, which mattered though, for something far more fundamental had taken place. That utterance, "*NAMU AMIDA BUTSU*," seemed not to have issued from the lips of the person who stood before me. It had pierced me like a flash of light shot out from the very source of life itself. It had demolished my discriminating way of being—which had led me to expect something from Hisamatsu Sensei—and awakened me to an infinite opening right beneath my subjective existence.

The season of the ginger flower now approaches. Hisamatsu Sensei, Shizan Rōshi, and Sōkan Rōshi, have all passed away. This is a good time to savor the words of Daitō Kokushi:

> Billions of kalpas apart
> And yet not a moment separated.

KONDŌ TESSHŌ

Philosophy Worthy of the Name

It was my good fortune to encounter the thought of Professor Hisamatsu Shin'ichi precisely at that point in my life when I was beginning to ask serious questions about the limitations of Western philosophy. At that time I was most troubled by what I understood to be Western thought's difficulty in dealing with what I then called "the negativities" of existence. These "negativities" were not abstract categories but concrete and immediately relevant aspects of life—things such as loneliness, old age, death, the place of evil in our world, and negative expression in the arts. It suddenly seemed to me that all the philosophy I had read up to that

point in my life had in one way or another failed to deal adequately with these "negativities"; the fact that something such as death might be viewed even as positive was not entertained in what I had read and in what I had been taught.

It was, therefore, with a great deal of interest and excitement that I found and read "The Concept of Oriental Nothingness" by Professor Hisamatsu. I cannot, of course, say that I understood it then or even that I understand it very well now. Nevertheless in it I sensed the presence of a profoundly philosophical mind probing to the root of the most difficult problems of our existence, namely, the problems of death and of non-being. Hisamatsu did not evade such fundamental problems—as does so much of modern Western philosophy through its preoccupation with the technicalities of logic and of language. Instead he directly addressed such questions as *the* most basic ones faced by man. In addition I was fascinated by Hisamatsu's clear readiness to explore the positive dimension of all those things I had called "the negativities." Here, I thought, was something refreshingly different from the whole trajectory of Western thought—not because it was "exotic" and "oriental" but because it struck me as true and because it seemed to have profound implications for Western civilization.

But the thought of Professor Hisamatsu was and even today remains difficult for a Westerner such as myself. I probably would have abandoned all hope of ever making progress if it had not been for Professor Abe Masao who for more than a decade has kindly clarified many things that were puzzles to me, has prodded me into the exploration of the connection between Hisamatsu's thought and Zen, has opened my eyes to the importance of the "Kyoto School" of philosophy as a whole, and who a few years ago made arrangements for a small group of us to meet Professor Hisamatsu at his home in Gifu. This meeting confirmed what I had long suspected: the thought and the personality of Hisamatsu Sensei were one whole. Moreover, the extraordinary vitality and creativity he showed us were rooted in what he told us had been a whole lifetime spent dying. Here, I felt, was a uniquely personal embodiment of positive negativity. Here, I thought, was a man whose realization and articulation of the nothingness of *mu* might even be able to breathe some new life into the moribund state of Western philosophy. It was later, upon return to America, that I realized that some of the most honest Western philosophers were aware that Western thought was in a severely troubled condition; some have, in fact, been writing concerning the necessary "end of philosophy as we have known it." I suspect that academic philosophy in the West is being forced to confront the fact of its virtual irrelevance. Perhaps the next step may be the recognition that philosophy worthy of the name will be ready to face rather than evade the most fundamental questions of existence.

Our habit of evasion is an old one and shows up in peculiar places. Some years ago I had begun a study of the poetry of Saigyō, a Japanese monk of the twelfth

century. Saigyō had been referred to only occasionally in Western writing about Japan but already something of a fixed opinion had taken shape. Saigyō was almost invariably described merely as a "sad" or a "lonely" poet and it was strongly implied that these rather negative characteristics had something to do with the fact that Saigyō was a Buddhist. Little or no attempt was made to probe the special character and meaning of the poet's sadness and loneliness. Certainly there was not the slightly suggestion that there might, in fact, be something positive and valuable in these features of his verse. This fixed opinion concerning Saigyō was one which, I must say, was fairly common in Japanese scholarship as well up until quite recently. In any case I gradually found it impossible to be satisfied with this reading of the twelfth-century poet.

Now I realize that this dissatisfaction was caused not only by things within the poetry itself but also by my growing attraction to the thought of Professor Hisamatsu. In my attempt to gain a better reading of Saigyō and of other literary figures of medieval Japan I was immeasurably helped by Professor Kitayama Masamichi, whose sensitivity both to literature and to the thought of Hisamatsu was indispensable to me. Although there remain aspects of Saigyō's depth that still escape my understanding, it seemed increasingly clear to me that very often in Saigyō's verse the so-called "negativities" are embraced and affirmed. As a practitioner of Buddhism Saigyō realized that it was necessary to face and to penetrate such things as loneliness and death rather than put them behind his back as the unwanted and unbearable negativities of existence. It is not, then, a mere coincidence that many of Saigyō's poems—especially those written late in his life—show the characteristics of the Zen aesthetic depicted so brilliantly by Professor Hisamatsu in *Zen and the Fine Arts.*

It is one of the most exhilarating things in life to discover something which promises a new and rich resource for intellectual vitality. Such, I think, is what many in the West are beginning to find in the practice and thought of Zen. The explorations are still tentative and cautious. Professor Hisamatsu did much to show us that there is great value in such a pursuit and that the source is inexhaustible. I think that not only many of us as individuals but our civilization as a whole will be vastly benefited by this creative engagement with the nothingness of the orient.

William R. LaFleur