

# From Nothingness to Nothingness

## The Nature and Destiny of the Self in Boehme and Nishitani

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**I**N A RECENT ARTICLE, Stephen Phillips has pointed to perhaps the most serious difficulty confronting those who are engaged in the ongoing philosophical and religious dialogue between East and West. The problem is the apparent failure of language to provide, even approximately, a lucid articulation of the fundamental matters under discussion. Mr. Phillips goes so far as to criticize Nishitani for being an "anti-intellectual" and "an irresolute and unconscientious metaphysician."<sup>1</sup> Rather harsh words for a philosopher whom even Phillips considers a considerable contributor to Buddhist metaphysics. But Mr. Phillips never stops to ask himself, in the article at least, whether the criteria he is applying to determine the degree of clarity he demands, are appropriate to what Phillips himself, somewhat confusingly, calls the realm of mysticism.

Unfortunately we live in a world culture that is spellbound by the breathtaking results of applied technology; so much so that any attempt to escape the logic of the excluded middle is considered to be a kind of insanity. It is perhaps already too late to entertain the hope, expressed quite early in this century by Martin Heidegger, that we might still be able to exclude calculative thinking from those areas of life in

<sup>1</sup> Stephen H. Phillips, "Nishitani's Buddhist Response to Nihilism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (1987), p. 94.

which it can only be destructive. Already in 1946 in his letter to Jean Beaufret on Humanism, Heidegger clearly anticipates the increasing enslavement of language under the domination of undifferentiated public communication. Nishitani, like Heidegger his teacher in Germany before him, has continued this urgent theme in the hope of directing students to an existential realization of the meaning of the contemporary struggle between religion and science. I say existential because it is not simply a matter of seeking intellectual clarity as an academic exercise. In the last analysis, it is a matter of conversion, a re-orientation of thinking and acting in the light of experienced wisdom.

Our task in the following pages is to venture a comparison of Nishitani Keiji and Jacob Boehme, the 17th century German philosopher, focusing on the nature and destiny of the human self. These two thinkers represent two vastly different cultures, and, although the comparison rests ultimately on the basic similarity of their fundamental points of view, it is Nishitani who made such a comparison possible by his reception of the German religious tradition, particularly the work of Meister Eckhart, the 14th century German mystic. But his reception of continental philosophy was only the beginning. What makes *Religion and Nothingness* a work of such extraordinary power is its attempt to translate the substance of two mythical traditions, Christian and Buddhist, onto a universal plane where the language of myth can be translated into a mutually accessible vehicle of communication. By myth, I of course do not mean something untrue. On the contrary, the genuinely mythical is always true, but that truth is always embedded within the world of historical experience. The language that each tradition uses for its expression developed among particular peoples in particular geographical regions, reflecting particular experiences. Because both of these traditions are embedded in such ancient and vital linguistic cultures from which they have drawn their energy and life, it seems at times that the barriers to mutual understanding are almost insurmountable. We need but think of the anomalies produced by the immature attempt of all but a few Americans in the 1960s to assimilate Zen Buddhism without regard for the deep roots of spiritual and physical discipline in the soil of its Buddhist homeland. In contrast, Nishitani's penetrating analysis of our cultural crisis, his reception of European philosophy and his profound understanding of his own Buddhist tradition come together to open up a region where the problems stemming

from the obscurity of mythical language can be addressed.

Such an approach is particularly important in the case of Boehme, whose situation is different, but equally complex. Like Meister Eckhart 300 years earlier, he sought a different language that was capable of expressing as accurately as possible the vision that filled his mind. But Boehme was in some ways more fortunate than Eckhart who was condemned to express himself in the increasingly rigid language of a decadent Scholastic tradition. Reiner Schürmann has convincingly demonstrated to what extent the leading Dominican theologians of Eckhart's day, some of them responsible for the Meister's condemnation, were unable to understand their colleague's distinction between substantial and operational identity in the relation between man and God because the daring formulations of Eckhart's German sermons had shattered the largely petrified concepts of the Latin tradition in which these theologians were thinking. In Eckhart's case, the translation from Latin to German gave wings to his imagination and courage to his theological speculation.

As I said, Boehme was in some ways more fortunate than Eckhart. But, like Eckhart, he too was confronted with an establishment, this time Lutheran, that had ignored Luther's vituperations against Aristotle and the "whore of Reason," and had thrown itself once again into the arms of Aristotle in order to do battle against the Roman foe. In Lutheran hands the Scholastic tradition had become even more rigid and narrow (at least the Pietists who were soon to come on the scene regarded it so), and the activity of these Lutheran Scholastics accomplished little more than buttress the creed with set formulas against the new heretics. Among these so-called heretics was Jacob Boehme.

Boehme's heresy was of course not Roman. On the contrary, he always considered himself a devout follower of Luther. But for the expression of his religious vision he found Scholastic theology, then still in vogue even among the Lutherans, not only useless, but downright diabolical! In his search for an appropriate vehicle he found a symbolic language in the increasingly persecuted esoteric religious tradition of the Renaissance. This new language, developed during the years of the Renaissance, particularly in Germany, was as eclectic as the general thought of the Renaissance itself, consisting of influences from the worlds of alchemy, astrology, the Cabala and natural philosophy, all wondrously interwoven in the influential thought and activity of



Paracelsus. Boehme was heir to all this feverish activity during the 100 years preceding his own work. From our point of view we might consider it unfortunate that he chose this language to express his vision, because this language was to lose its currency during the next 200 years. Goethe and Mozart, in the context of the Masonic Lodge, were among the last significant thinkers and artists to whom this language was still familiar. Today it ekes out its existence among the largely ignored cults and sects on the fringe of our society, often cropping up in extremely debased forms. Because of this, we find ourselves obliged to translate Boehme's work not only from German into English, or Japanese as the case may be, but from a faded symbolism, at times highly poetic and dramatic, into some more conceptually accessible language. This requires a kind of translation quite akin to that undertaken by Nishitani for the Buddhist tradition.

The most important similarity between Boehme and Nishitani and the basis for any possible comparison lies in the concept of absolute nothingness, which Boehme calls *der Ungrund*, generally translated simply as Unground. Boehme shares with certain Western mystics, including Meister Eckhart, as well as with the mainstream of Mahayana Buddhism, the view that ultimate reality lies, in a certain sense, beyond the realm of beings. That includes of course the notion of a supreme Being or God as conceived by the mainstream of the Christian theological tradition. Meister Eckhart, for example, speaks of the absolute nothingness of the Godhead which lies, in a certain sense, beyond the three Persons of the Trinity. More recently Paul Tillich has spoken of the God beyond God. This rival Western tradition, which has been generally suppressed by the orthodox branches of the Christian religion, is the necessary starting point for any comparison with an Eastern tradition as understood by the representatives of the Kyoto School. It is for this reason of course that Eckhart and Boehme have proven so influential in Eastern circles. Many of the reservations expressed by Christians about an East-West dialogue can be ultimately traced back to a rejection of this fundamental position. More important for our present purposes, this underlying notion of the Unground or Absolute Nothingness accounts to a large extent for the extreme difficulties encountered by these thinkers in formulating their ideas in communicable language accessible to discursive reason.

In order to understand this similarity between Boehme and Nishitani



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and the problem of language that necessarily arises with it, we shall first have to lay out Boehme's basic paradigm of manifest Reality in his own mythical language by following his explanation of the development of the Unground out of its undifferentiated state into the One and into the Two in the unfolding of the fully articulated divine nature.

Out of the absolute nothingness of the Unground, where nothing can be seen or known because of its total lack of differentiation, there arises an ungrounded will. The emergence of this will, as essentially undifferentiated as the Unground itself, is an unfathomable mystery. It is the emergence of the One from the Nothing, a process that has baffled mystics and philosophers of every age and land. It is that moment of amazement over the fact that something is rather than nothing, the moment of *Erstaunen*, which Heidegger has again rediscovered as the fundamental basis of all genuine thinking. But this will is, as we said, ungrounded, that is, unessentialized. Its absolute lack of differentiation precludes any possibility of self-manifestation. In order to reveal absolute nothingness in its potentially infinite dimensions, the will must do what seems to be the impossible: it must generate movement within the Nothingness. For without motion there is no articulation; hence, no vision; hence, no knowledge. Undifferentiated light cannot be seen against undifferentiated light. To make light visible there is required a background of darkness against which it can be seen. For this purpose there now arises in this undifferentiated will a single impulse expressed as two contrary motions; the first, the desire to reveal the light; the other, the desire to generate darkness. Boehme refers to this in the following terms: "Thus, the first will (which is called Father, and is itself freedom) desires nature, and Nature with great longing desires freedom, that it may be released from the torment of anguish."<sup>2</sup> This is a highly mysterious, rationally inaccessible moment in which the Two are simultaneously born out of the One. It is also a moment of considerable importance for our present concern because the simultaneity of the generation of opposites accounts for the paradoxes of nonduality which permeate Boehme's entire system. He is as aware as Lao Tsu or Nishitani that ultimate reality cannot be caught in the net of language, and that the Unground and its emanations are inaccessible to discursive

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, translated by John Rolleston Earle, with an introduction by Nicolas Berdayaev (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), pp. 17-18.

rationality. Already early in his career Boehme realized the inevitable futility of trying to express such reality in human language. The only appropriate, but of course equally inadequate language would be silence. But Boehme refuses to surrender to this temptation. "Let's not give up our ABC's," he says. Otherwise we surrender the possibility of enlightenment as well.<sup>3</sup> Let us now continue to follow Boehme's description of the unfolding of manifest life. Since the two principles of Light and darkness in their state of nondual unity are not accessible to discursive language, Boehme, using his ABC's, resorts to a dangerous ploy. He separates them into two distinct worlds, one of darkness, one of light. As such they are of course abstractions and Boehme warns us again and again against reifying the abstract elements of these worlds.

As we have seen, the will of the Unground to reveal the Oneness of infinite life involves its opposite, the generation of the dark world of multiplicity. The first movement within the Absolute, then, is that of contraction, the generation of cold, sharp, dark density within the undifferentiated nothingness. Boehme refers to it as a kind of self-impregnation. This conflict between the two aspects of this one will is again couched in mythical language. Boehme calls these two warring elemental forms of the divine nature the spirits of *herb* and *bitter*, two common German adjectives meaning astringent and bitter.<sup>4</sup> We could of course use Boehme's favorite image of positive and negative electrical charges as in the process of a thunderstorm; or in astrological terms we could also designate this as the conflict between the Primum Mobile and the planet Saturn. None of these expressions, of course, can be called the common coin of philosophical discourse, but by using this language Boehme hopes perhaps to prevent our falling into the temptation of reifying the terms and thus misunderstanding their nondual relationship. The conflict between these two spirits is a terrifying moment. The absolute freedom of Godhead finds itself being subjected to restriction and limitation. As the darkness thickens and grows more

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Boehme, *De Tribus Principiis, oder Beschreibung der drey Prinzipien Göttliches Wesens*, Faksimile-Neudruck der Ausgabe von 1730, vol 2, edited by Will-Erich Peuckert (Stuttgart: Frommanns Verlag, 1960), p. 88. Translation by the author.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13. Boehme never tires of restating this process of the birth of the Divine Nature. He describes it over and over again, particularly in his early works, as if constantly striving for greater clarity of presentation.



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hard and dense, the light will eventually be reduced to less than a spark. Boehme likens it to the light contained in a stone. This causes such panic that the spark becomes enraged and rises up against the encroaching darkness in the attempt to shatter to pieces its hard density. But the darkness continues to frustrate this attempt by increasing its density, and the rage of the spark becomes ever more intense.

The process of this dark world is designed to produce the basis of essentialized life in the mode of differentiation; essentially motion and generation, symbolized in Boehme's imagery by fire. We must again recall that it is in this form an abstraction. Neither in divine life nor in human experience can fire be separated from light. But Boehme, as a kind of example, confers life on this abstraction in the mythological figure of Satan in whom the dreadful fire which should be only the unessentialized basis of life has become essentialized in the consciousness of Satan because of his rejection of the light. The inner life of this fallen angel, imagining, in arrogant despair, back into the dark world of its mother and isolated forever in self-imposed exile from the full realization of life, is Boehme's vision of hell. The angel's arrogant will continually grasps for the light, not to reflect in himself its beauty and glory, but to conquer it and bring it under his control. By refusing to empty himself of himself, he has become the incarnation of the fiery spirit of the dark world and in this act of self-appropriation he has confirmed in himself a state of unending frustration, agony, and rage. Of course, this mythical image can easily be transposed into the terms of contemporary nihilism, a topic on which Nishitani has made a significant contribution. Commenting on the problem of nihilistic subjectivity, David Levin says, "The subjectivity of the will constitutes a form of suffering in which the ego is stuck in a dialectic of power that moves back and forth, without development or growth, between loss and envy, depression and mania, passivity and rage: between, on the one hand, anxieties around matters of dependency, helplessness and impotence, and, on the other, dreams of the most godlike omnipotence."<sup>5</sup> This is a most accurate description of Boehme's view of Satan's dilemma.

Although this dark world is a necessary moment in the process of the

<sup>5</sup> David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 412.

manifestation of divine life, it is, in contrast to Satan, never actualized in the nature of God himself. In God, the conflict between these two aspects of the will is resolved, not by any resolution into a third term, but by maintaining their nondual relationship even in reconciliation. At the most intense moment of this conflict, these two opposing spirits, *herb* and *bitter*, begin to spin and form a turning wheel, a kind of "body," which Boehme calls *Angst*, existential dread, in which the two spirits dwell. In the dark world this wheel represents the beginning of finite generation, the advent of movement and time by which the undifferentiated fullness of the Unground will eventually achieve its manifestation in the generation of finite and transitory moments. When this conflict reaches its greatest intensity, there occurs a lightning flash. This is the moment of insight and decision. It signals the total transformation of the two warring aspects of the will in the dark world. Boehme formulates this as follows: "Here then we understand the will in two ways: one which rises up in fierceness to the generation of the wrath-fire, the other which imagines after the center of the word and, passing out of the anguish, as through a dying, sinks into the free life."<sup>6</sup> At the flash of lightning the first aspect of the will, the enraged spark, rises up against this hard, dark density and smashes it to pieces. This is the advent of multiplicity and fragmentation. Each fragment, one after the other, reflects, as in a mirror, one of the infinite facets of the unmanifest Absolute. This is only possible, however, because the second aspect of the will, the dark density, has become transformed at the lightning flash into the gentle suppleness of spiritual water which is willing now to reflect the light, now made visible by the action of the fire, and make manifest the infinite life of the Unground. This transformation of the will, expressed by Boehme in unmistakably erotic terms, brings about the birth of the light world, which Boehme again is able to speak about only by abstracting it from the dark world. The turning wheel of the warring spirits in the dark world, *herb* and *bitter*, are now transformed into the spirits of love and harmony. The body of *Angst*, existential dread, formed by the turning wheel in the dark world is transformed into the "body" of wisdom, manifesting the light and beauty of the divine freedom.

Boehme has now placed before us two worlds, the dark and the light.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., *Six Theosophic Points*, p. 15.



The crucial question now concerns the relationship of these two worlds to each other. Unlike the metaphysical dualism of Descartes, formulated at almost the same moment of the 17th century in which Boehme was struggling so desperately to articulate his own vision of reality, these two worlds for Boehme are pure abstractions. They do not and can not exist apart from each other. As was said above, they are two nondual moments of one will to manifestation. They are absolutely two and absolutely one without any dialectical resolution. Each has its roots in the other. To ask which came first would be as futile as asking the same question about the chicken and the egg. This absolute nondual unity, achieved through conflict even in the divine nature, is the state of paradise where the darkness of multiplicity and limitation is constantly transfused by the brilliant light of divinity, where the surging fire of the vitality of life is transformed into the inner glow of the divine light. We can express this in Boehme's terms by using the symbol of the Star of David, undoubtedly familiar to him from his knowledge of the Cabala and still familiar to us today as the symbol on the Israeli flag. When the triangle of Fire, the dark World, and the triangle of water, the light world, are united in nondual harmony, the fire of the spirit hovers over and impregnates the waters of life to bring forth and manifest the splendor of the differentiated wisdom of the Unground.

It is obvious of course that mankind in its present state does not live in such a paradise. When God, as Boehme understands it, moved to manifest his divine life in the third Principle of the material universe, Adam was only briefly able to maintain in himself the androgynous unity of his integral being which was a perfect reflection of the unity of light and dark worlds in his human nature. He was placed into the Garden of Eden with the stipulation that he was not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In other words, Adam was to live in perfect nonattachment among the beings of the material universe and at the same time enjoy the ceaseless vision of Absolute Nothingness as its infinite life was reflected around him in the transient world of endless change. But he was forbidden on pain of death to allow the fire of desire to awaken within him in the illusion that his emptiness could be filled by "eating" the elements of the material world. Adam, for mysterious reasons, was unable to sustain this perfection. He abandoned the androgynous unity of his being and succumbed to his initial Fall at which time God responded by separating the unified

male and female elements of Adam's soul and granted the creation of Eve. In this weakened state they both ate of the Tree of Knowledge and were banished from the Garden. Even after the Fall, however, the material world is still a mirror of the paradise of the divine nature. The principal difference is that in this material world the darkness of the first Principle is openly manifest in human consciousness. The children of Adam live in conscious awareness of a world constituted by actual birth, growth, decay and death in actual time as we now know it. But there is no complete separation of worlds, as if nature were all darkness and paradise were some transcendent, otherworldly realm in the mold of popular Platonism. Even here in our everyday experience the original nondual emanations of the one ungrounded will are still operative. The tree outside my window in my so-called real world is also the tree standing in paradise. They are separated in human experience only by the veil of the second Principle; in other words, by the experience of rebirth. For this reason we live in a world of ambiguity and paradox and the language by which we seek to express the ultimate reality of our world is equally permeated by ambiguity and paradox. It is simply impossible to express within the ordinary parameters of discursive logic the fact that a thing both exists and does not exist. The abstraction of the either/or relationship breaks down in such an attempt and reality escapes the net of language by which reason seeks to exercise its control. This is precisely the dilemma that lies at the basis of the problems expressed so vehemently by Steven Phillips referred to in our opening remarks. By applying ordinary logic, Mr. Phillips was led to reify the abstractions by which Nishitani attempts, necessarily inadequately, to speak of such things at all, and thereby missed the reality to which they pointed. This is most apparent when he speaks about Nishitani's notion of "just sitting." If we insist on opposing the idea of "just sitting" to the idea of "abandoning all responsibilities in such a pursuit," as mutually exclusive activities, then we are falling into the very trap from which Nishitani wishes to free us.<sup>7</sup>

We now have before us the basic paradigm by which we shall be able to understand the birth and destiny of the human self as it emerges out of the center of nothingness in the dark world of the divine nature. But to pursue our comparison further we must begin to translate Boehme's

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., Phillips, p. 95.



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images into more common and comparable concepts. This is the point at which Nishitani's work can be of immense benefit. Boehme himself sets us on the path by referring to the darkness of the dark world as *das Nichts*, Nothingness. Without doing violence to Boehme's meaning, we can translate this *Nichts*, using Nishitani's terminology, as *kyomu*, nihility. This brings an aspect of Boehme's thought into relief which otherwise remains only implicit in the mythological imagery. By generating the world of darkness in himself, God the Father empties himself completely of himself. We might say that he "dies" and, in dying, becomes manifest in the dark world as the emptiness of a hungry will. This emptiness of incessant craving is a frantic desire for the light and forms the basis of all essentialized life, both divine and human. Without this drive and craving there would be no life. All motion and activity would cease and no manifestation of the inner life would be possible.

It is out of this divine emptiness that the human self is created. For both Boehme and Nishitani, man is not a creature created by a supreme Being called God. Just like the very self of God, man's self issues from the dark freedom of an infinite will. Nishitani makes his position quite clear in the following: "When something that is not God but stands by itself over against God, is posited, the field to which it is appointed—that is, the ground of its existence—must be a point within God where God is not God himself."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Boehme has always been sharply criticized by mainstream Christian theologians for contending that, although the source of potential evil does not of course lie in God, it nevertheless lies in the dark Principle of the divine nature where God is not God. This emerging self is a tremendously powerful craving for reality, an infinite drive, as Nishitani calls it. The wheel of desire and frustration propels it ever onward. The self is constantly urged to act in order to fill the emptiness with the reality it does not possess of itself. Its desire for the absolute, for which it emerged from nothingness, is continually frustrated by the limitations and restrictions imposed by its finitude. This moment of conflict between desire and limitation, however, is a most important moment in the development of this self. It is through this conflict that self-consciousness and ego are realized,

<sup>8</sup> Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated with an introduction by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 67.

without which there can be no actual subjectivity. As Nishitani reminds us, "Ego and person from the outset entail inward self-reflection without which they cannot come into being."<sup>9</sup> But the more fully self-reflective the subjectivity of the self becomes, the more it becomes aware of the presence of nihility at the ground of its existence: illness, accidents, hostility, to mention but a few. Finally it is the consciousness of nihility in the realization of its own necessary death that makes it clear that the world of beings, continually changing in its unmitigated impermanence, offers no ultimate source of meaning, that there is, as Nishitani expresses it, "nothing within or without on which to rely." Because the self must die, the normal world of everyday life in the material world, where the self has become seduced into searching for the means of self-realization, begins to lose its meaning. As a result, the self is propelled beyond the realm of beings into an existential appropriation of nihility and ultimately plunges into despair. Nishitani calls this moment that of the Great Doubt. Boehme expresses it of course much more dramatically in his imagery of the lightning flash, that moment of existential appropriation in the dark world in which nothingness, the very core of the self, is incorporated and realized in the self as *Angst*, existential dread.

In order to illustrate the journey of the self to realization, both Nishitani and Boehme have recourse to the figure of the circle. By comparing their use of this common symbol we can see just how similar the journey of the self is conceived. Nishitani, in the fourth chapter of his *Religion and Nothingness*, has made explicit use of the circle in his discussion of the structure and constitution of the self. Likewise Boehme, as we have seen, conceives the self, both divine and human, as a turning wheel. At the center of both these circles representing the self lies a realm which is not human, or, as in the case of God, not divine. Nishitani states clearly that "at the ground of our being human lies a level of *pure* being beyond any determination to the human." This means that "human Dasein may be said to emerge as the "con-formation" of the form of the human and the "trans-form" of being into a single whole. Since nihility lies directly under human existence, it is the point at which all form returns to nothingness."<sup>10</sup> With regard to Boehme, we

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 248



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have seen that the human self, just like the divine self, emerges from the dark center of the turning wheel and develops its life of human consciousness through the conflicts on the wheel. Since it emerges out of the emptiness, we can also here speak of a trans-form of being merging into a realm where all form returns to nothingness. For both thinkers this structure will be of immense importance for their understanding of the rebirth of the self.

The circumferences of the circles in both schemes are also similar. In Nishitani the circumference represents a kind of radiation from the center or home-ground of the self, where its conscious life is realized in the faculties of reason and sensation. This development entails the inevitability, initially at any rate, of the loss of an immediate relation to the Real. The development of self-consciousness is based on limitation and conflict and brings with it the unavoidable illusion of the separation of subject and object. Self-consciousness cannot develop without this conflict. The path of the infinite drive is necessarily blocked by the limitations of finitude and from this blockage is born self-reflection, the birth of the self-centered ego in the vitality of a living, conscious self. In Boehme the aspect of conflict is again more pronounced. Self-consciousness arises in the conflict between light and dark, contraction and expansion, positive and negative, power and limitation. Here too the infinite drive compels the self out of its Center, its home-ground, into a world of action in search of the food of reality. We might liken this movement of the self from the center toward the circumference of the circle to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Self-realization would have been impossible in Eden since genuine and vital ego-consciousness depends on the eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In other words, it depends on real conflict. For as we well know, light can only be seen against a dark background. For this reason there has often been, in the Christian tradition, an ambiguous attitude toward the so-called fall of man into sin. This ambiguity is most pronounced in the Latin Rite of the Blessing of the Easter Candle where man's fall is referred to as "happy," the *felix culpa*. The same ambiguity is also found with regard to Lucifer himself, the Light-Bringer, without whose temptation man would for ever remain an undeveloped child.

These circles, as we move from the center outward toward the circumference, can represent for both authors the dark world of samsara,

of karma, of infinite fragmentation and self-centeredness. It is the world Abe Masao refers to when he says: "Karma is nothing but a realization of the infinite drive functioning in the nexus of being-doing-becoming throughout the beginningless and endless process of time. It is in the wellspring of that infinite drive that an elemental self enclosure and an infinite self-centeredness are realized as the fundamental darkness. This realization of the fundamental darkness is essentially linked with an infinite openness of nihility."<sup>11</sup>

We have at this point arrived at the full constitution of the self with its self-conscious ego. The faculties of sensation and reason are firmly established at the circumference of our circles. But it is precisely at the point of this full development that the self gradually comes to realize that its ego-self and the world of things among which it lives are "illusions," that they rest on the tangents of nihility where this so-called solid world with its "cloud-capped towers" melts away into nothingness. This is the world of karmic activity, of ignorance, the self-centered world of the infinite drive, and precisely because it is self-centered its impulse can never lead the self to authentic freedom. Again we turn to Abe Masao who has summarized this whole action perfectly when he says, "In this self-awareness of avidya the self is constantly oriented inward to the root-source of the self and yet can only transmit endlessly through time. This is the true form of our karma, that is, our being in time."<sup>12</sup> In Boehme the self-centered will to freedom continually returns to its dark mother, the root-source of its being, the monolithic hardness of implacable substance symbolizing the stiff-necked imperiousness of the self-centered will, only to find that it refuses to allow its darkness to reflect the light of reality. This refusal simply increases the density of the darkness as well as the rage of the frustrated will to freedom.

This moment in all its anguish is precisely the moment of possible reversal, the paradoxical moment when the darkness of anguish can turn into the light of joy, where the moment of the Great Death can become the moment of the Great Affirmation. It is the journey of the self back to the center of its being, the home-ground, where the transform of being merges into nothingness, where the self realizes and ac-

<sup>11</sup> Abe Masao, "Will, Sunyata and History," in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), p. 292.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.



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tualizes in itself the nondual identity of absolute emptiness and absolute openness. In both authors this transformation is conceived as the journey from the circumference of the circle back to the center, from the world of total individuality, where the unity of the cosmos is lost in endless fragmentation, back to the unity of the One. Boehme expresses this quite simply in the formula: the self sacrifices "vieles" (many things) for which in return it receives "alles" (all things).

But for neither author can this journey to the One be conceived in metaphysical terms, a basically Western conception of the unity of the One from which all multiplicity has been abstracted. As Nishitani explains, only on the field of emptiness, the field of the Unground, can the unity of a fragmented world be restored without sacrificing the reality of multiplicity. What was experienced on the circumference of the circle as the meaningless dispersion of all things into nothingness is now seen, on the field of sunyata or in the light of the second Principle, as the paradoxical unity of the one and the many. Not that the One and the many were separate and now are joined to one another by the process of development, but that the one and the many were never separated in the first place. Their separation was an "illusion" brought about by the effect of Maya, or as Boehme says, by the *magia divina*, the "magic" of the first Principle where something is found where there is nothing. This is Boehme's way of expressing the nondual unity of reality and is the basis for the definition of reality as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. It is into this center of nothingness that the self must return in order to be reborn into the unity of the whole. "Suche Gott im Centro deines Lebens Geburt"<sup>13</sup> (Search for God in the center of the birth of your life). Go back to the moment when the self emerged from the emptiness of the divine nature. For both Nishitani and Boehme, this return entails the transformation of the will.

We are here at the most paradoxical of moments. Heidegger in his essay *Gelassenheit* has expressed this dilemma as the will not to will. The will must be given up because all thinking and acting on the plane of consciousness involves the will. "But thinking, understood in the traditional way, as representing, is a kind of willing."<sup>14</sup> Peter Kreeft com-

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., Boehme, *De Tribus Principiis*, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, a translation of *Gelassenheit* by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 58.

ments on this statement of Heidegger's by asking "why? Because it is my thinking: my ego does it. The primary (or even constituting) act of ego is will, desire, *tanha* (a Buddhist would say)." <sup>15</sup> How then can one will not to will?—an apparently insoluble contradiction. Both Boehme and Nishitani, however, have a similar solution for this apparent dilemma.

Nishitani has prepared his answer to the question of the will from the very first pages of his book. He has spoken at length about the fire that does not burn itself, the water that does not wash itself, and the eye that does not see itself. In this way he traces the reality of a thing back to the home-ground of the thing itself, back to the point where it merges into nothingness and is reborn as the very thing it is. The fire is not fire and therefore it is truly fire. It is only in these paradoxical terms that the reality of things can be expressed or understood. This reversal is equally true of the human self which must return from the circumference of the circle to its center. As long as we are on the field of ego, this transformation is impossible. By returning to the center, the point at which the ego merges back into nothingness at its origin, the ego and its connection with the will on the field of consciousness is negated and thus transformed.

After discussing the different Western notions of the will, the will of God in Christianity and the will to power in Nietzsche, as a solution to the problem of human enlightenment, Nishitani asserts that only the standpoint of *sunyata* is an absolute negativity toward the will which lies at the ground of every type of self-centeredness. "Only on the field of *sunyata* is the Existenz of nonego possible." Here nonego is the self, or to express it in the familiar paradoxical formula: "the self is not self, therefore it is truly self." Nishitani continues: "This reversal is precisely that existential self-awareness wherein the self is *realized* (manifested-*sive*-apprehended) as an emergence into its nature from nonego."<sup>16</sup> We must emphasize here again that, although the will is negated by returning to nothingness on the field of *sunyata*, it is by no means destroyed. To destroy the will would be to destroy the human being. Instead of being annihilated, the will of the self emerges out of

<sup>15</sup> Peter Kreeft, "Zen in Heidegger," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1971), p. 530.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 251.



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the emptiness of its origin and is thus transformed into its original nature.

This occurs when the moment of the Great Death, when the self realizes that the whole world will sink into the total meaninglessness of nihilism, is transformed into the moment of the Great Affirmation where the experience of nihilism is in turn negated and the self and the world re-emerge as the eminently Real. Samsara must be negated and Nirvana affirmed through the negation of the will, but the truth concerning ultimate reality is attained only by reaffirming on the field of nonego the realm of samsara which has been negated. Nishitani calls this new dimension *samsara-sive-nirvana* in which both realms have a nondual relation. They are absolutely two and yet absolutely one. Everyday life as we know it is both negated and affirmed. It is both genuine reality and a complete illusion. It is the paradoxical realm of what Nishitani calls serious play where nonaction is genuine action and where non-thinking is genuine thinking. Language can carry us no further. Such realization can only be quietly and delicately lived in the paradoxical consciousness of reflective spontaneity.

When we turn to Boehme we find an equally paradoxical solution to the transformation of the will. We have already heard Boehme say that if we are to find God we must return to the center of the birth of our life. But this return to the center of our being where it merges into the nothingness from which it came, also involves both an affirmation and a negation of the will. Let us recall a passage from Boehme's *Six Puncta Theosophica* previously quoted:

Here then we understand the will in two ways: one which rises up in fierceness to the generation of the wrath-fire, the other which imagines after the center of the word and, passing out of the anguish, as through a dying, sinks into the free life.<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, the first aspect of the will, the impulse to freedom in manifestation, must continue to desire the production of the darkness of nature whereby the wisdom of the unmanifest Unground can be manifested in the ceaseless generation of individual life. The infinite drive must not be weakened if the full development of the human self is

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit., *Six Theosophic Points*, p. 15.

to be maintained. Its annihilation would, as in Nishitani, eliminate the vehicle by which the essentialization of the Real can occur. At the same time, the will as self-centered desire must be transformed through a return to a state of individual being in which the illusion of ego is destroyed. As in Nishitani, this occurs through a determination of the self to will not to will. When the lightning flash occurs, the other aspect of the will, the hard density, sinks back into a kind of death in which the darkness of its nature is transfigured by the ignition of the fire, thus regaining its original nature as a mirror of Reality. The paradoxical coincidence of these two wills, symbolized by the lightning flash, is not a once-for-all occurrence. It neither stops the movement of time, nor does it abolish the actuality of the samsaric world. Enlightenment is not a transcendence into a timeless world where the individual, the culture or the religion could somehow enduringly "possess" the truth. Truth is not something one can possess. It is a moment by moment decision to open oneself to the light of absolute nothingness through a transformation of the will, a clearing of vision in which the egocentric impulse dies to itself and is reborn in the unity of the One, this One conceived as identity in difference, the reality of nondual unity.

This is not of course a new teaching in the Western tradition, peculiar to Boehme. Like Eckhart before him, Boehme directs the soul to regain in itself a spiritual virginity in which the self would be completely free of all created images that arise in it, as free as it was when it was not. The self, while in the state of its full faculties, must return spiritually to the state of pre-birth existence in the absolute nothingness of the Godhead in order to become free of all created images. When the self has freed itself from attachment to all these images, its relative nothingness merges into the absolute nothingness of the Godhead and there, like the creative activity of the Father in the Son, is reborn as an ecstatic vehicle of manifestation.

In conclusion, I would like to place this comparison of Nishitani and Boehme back into the context of our contemporary dialogue. In his book, *Beyond Theism and Atheism*, where Robert Gall examines the possible relevance of Heidegger's philosophy for the continuing discussions on religious thinking in a pluralistic context, he says, "Man cultivates and guards the familiar in order to 'break out' of it and let Being break in; man's darkness, his capacity for failure, for falling, for losing himself amidst beings and thus forgetting himself is, strangely



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enough, a 'dark light' wherein the truth of Being may shine."<sup>18</sup> We must not think of rebirth as an abstraction. It is not pure bliss, unalloyed harmony or perfect security. An authentically religious life for both Nishitani and Boehme is a constant struggle to overcome the darkness at the center of our being without ever hoping to free ourselves completely from it. Indeed, it is only because of this darkness that enlightenment is possible at all. The true joy of our existence is always born out of the pain of struggle with darkness. The Great Affirmation is born only out of the Great Death.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Gall, *Beyond Theism and Atheism: Heidegger's Significance for Religious Thinking* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 85.