

# Absolute Nothingness and Emptiness in Nishitani Keiji

## An Essay from the Perspective of Classical Buddhist Thought

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**T**HE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY of the Kyoto School, including that of Nishitani Keiji, has often been discussed in terms of the influence of and its response to Western philosophers such as William James, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, or Christian mystics such as Eckhart. But how does the thought of Nishitani Keiji relate to traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist thought? Does Nishitani represent classical Buddhist ideas? Should he? In creatively rethinking both the Buddhist and Western tradition to apply them to problems of our age, one should expect some radical and challenging rethinking of both traditions. On the other hand, there are people who are not happy to have the Kyoto School touted as representing Buddhism to the West. The writings of the Kyoto School philosophers are not widely read by traditional Buddhist and sectarian scholars (both Japanese and Western). Some even say that they are “not Buddhist.” Whether for good or ill, how far does the Kyoto School and Nishitani “depart” from the bounds of classical Buddhist thought? One of the contributions of the philosophers of the Kyoto School in their attempt to re-present Buddhist thought in the modern philosophical arena is to introduce the phrase “absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu* 絶対無). But what is the significance of this phrase, and how does it relate to classical Buddhist formulations? In this essay I wish to focus on a specific and narrow theme: to examine Nishitani’s discussion of absolute nothingness and emptiness from the perspective of a fundamental principle of traditional East Asian Buddhism, that is, the T’ien-t’ai concept of the threefold truth.

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### THE T' IEN-T' AI THREEFOLD TRUTH AS A GENERAL PRINCIPLE OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

The T'ien-t'ai concept of the threefold truth—emptiness, the conventional, and the middle—was developed by Chih-i (538–597) as an expression of the basic structure of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and practice. It developed specifically in the context of the two-truths controversy in China; a debate concerning the classical Buddhist idea of the mundane “worldly” truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and the “real, ultimate” truth (*paramārtha-satya*). The issue remained unresolved and had reached a dead end because it had been couched in terms of the ambiguous, dualistic, and misleading terminology of being (*yu* 有) and nothingness (*wu* 無). The worldly truth was identified with and explained in terms of “being”, and the ultimate truth was identified and explained in terms of “nothingness.”<sup>1</sup> However, this formulation could not get beyond the dichotomy of being and nothingness, nor fully express the Buddhist teachings. Chih-i's threefold truth broke through this impasse by discussing the issue in terms of emptiness, the conventional, and the middle. Later, for historical reasons that cannot be explored here but do require further clarification, the Ch'an (Zen) tradition reverted to a frequent use of *wu/mu* (nothingness) rhetoric, and this has strongly colored the modern understanding of East Asian Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

The locus classicus for the formulation of the threefold truth by Chih-i is from the Chinese verse translation of *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* of Nāgārjuna, chapter 24:18 (T 30.33b):

The co-arising of all things

I call emptiness 空.

Or, [I call it] a conventional designation 假名.

<sup>1</sup> For details see my analysis in *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the oft-quoted article “The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness,” the Zen scholar/master Hisamatsu Shin'ichi gives several possible meanings of the term “nothingness” and proffers an “Oriental Nothingness” (caps in the original) based for the most part on the *Awakening of Faith*, the *Platform Sutra*, and other Zen sources. However, his attempt to define an “Oriental Nothingness” (in contrast to, perhaps, an Occidental Somethingness?), is dated and opaque. As we shall see in the few short pages of my essay, the classical T'ien-t'ai threefold truth, Zen *mu* rhetoric, and Nishitani's absolute nothingness are each distinct (though related) formulations of “nothingness” and do not rely on some vague, underlying notion of Oriental Nothingness. There is no single definable and consistent Oriental Nothingness, just as there is no single definable and consistent notion of “being” in the Western tradition.

Or again, this is the meaning of the Middle Way 中道.

Thus, reality is a single unity with three aspects: The first, emptiness, refers to absence of substantial being. The second, conventional reality, refers to the provisional or temporal existence of the phenomenal world which is co-arising. Finally, the Middle Way is a simultaneous affirmation of both.

For Chih-i, these three aspects are not separate, but integral parts of a unified reality. They are not separate realities in contrast with each other, but simultaneous and inclusive of each other. The world we experience is empty of an eternal, unchanging substance, and yet at the same time the objects of our experience have a temporary or conventional reality. Lest we lapse into the mistake of nihilism or substantivism, we need a Middle Way: to affirm the simultaneous emptiness of phenomena along with their temporal or conventional reality. This Middle Way, however, must not be grasped as an eternal, transcendental Reality; it is, rather, manifested in and through temporal, phenomenal reality, which is again in turn empty of an unchanging substance. The circle is complete: a perfectly integrated threefold truth.

To put it another way, "being" is mistakenly understood if taken as substantially existing, but if understood correctly, phenomena are seen as existing "conventionally." "Nothingness," on the other hand, is mistakenly understood if it is nihilistically taken as a complete denial of all existence, but if understood correctly, phenomena are seen as "empty" of substantial existence. Thus, both sides are expressions of the same idea, like two sides of a coin. This is the Middle: the simultaneous realization of the emptiness of phenomena that have temporal, conventional reality.

This is the classic T'ien-t'ai formulation of the threefold truth, but it is also more than just one sectarian interpretation. It is a basic pattern that incorporates both the negative and the positive, and which provides not only a basic structure for Buddhist thought but also for Buddhist practice. Thus one cultivates Buddhist practice to "empty" oneself of delusions and passionate afflictions, and to "gain" insight and compassion. One not only aims to attain wisdom for oneself, but to act compassionately for the sake of others. "Being" and "nothingness" are seen as mistaken extremes to be avoided. Such ideals are not limited to the T'ien-t'ai school, but are basic to Mahāyāna Buddhism in general.

Recently I was pleased to find that this threefold truth formulation was utilized in an editorial in the Buddhist newspaper *Chūgai Nippō* to buttress their

<sup>3</sup> See the translation in "Aum Alone in Japan: Religious Responses to the Aum Affair" by Robert Kisala in *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 19 (1995), pp. 12-14.



argument that Aum Shinrikyō—the group accused of planting poison gas on the Tokyo subways and which claims to be Buddhist—is not Buddhism. This editorial shows that the threefold truth formulation is not just a dead classical principle, but a position accepted by the Buddhist “establishment” as authoritative in their own self-understanding, and as a teaching that can be used as a measure for rejecting some other teaching (specifically that of Aum Shinrikyō) as “non-Buddhist.” Let us look at some excerpts from this editorial, not only to illustrate a contemporary application but also to flesh out the implications of the threefold truth formulation:

Anybody with even a slight knowledge of Buddhism cannot possibly believe that these people [Aum followers] are Buddhists. . . . Buddhism is characterized by the principle of the Middle Way. . . .

The Buddhist Middle Way found two classical expressions: the middle way between joy and sorrow of early Buddhism, and in Mahāyāna the middle way of the three truths of the empty, provisional, and middle. The former avoids extreme hedonism and asceticism and maintains that the true spiritual path and the true way of life lie in the middle of these two. Hedonism means dissipation in following one’s passions. Asceticism means the suppression of the instinct for life preservation and the infliction of suffering on one’s body. . . .

The Middle Way of the Three Truths of the *Lotus Sūtra* maintains that both the emptiness doctrine of the Hīnayāna and the doctrine of the provisional of the Mahāyāna are *upāya*, and that truth lies in a middle way that knows how to synthesize both without being caught by either. The emptiness vision teaches impermanence and egolessness with a view to eradicating the passions. This doctrine is said to be propounded as an *upāya* for the overcoming of egoism and the betterment of a secular world suffering from the struggles provoked by that egoism. The doctrine of the provisional, on the other hand, teaches that this world exists as a totality wherein everything is mutually dependent and that all things exist within a life project that is embraced by the Buddha’s mercy. Beings participate in this project, and all must live a life of merciful acts. That is the bodhisattva path of Mahāyāna. . . .

However, emptiness and the provisional [in themselves] are both partial truths that must be synthesized. The synthesis is the Middle Way of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Both emptiness (a monasticism that negates the passions) and the provisional (a lay ideal that reveres life) are standpoints that approach two sides of the truth. The Middle Way

consists in realizing a higher holistic value by synthesizing these two, and thereby pursuing the happiness of humankind. . . .

In order to be called Buddhist, one must follow the Middle Way on the basis of a vision of a world of dependent origination. . . .'

This editorial is an interesting mix of classical teaching and modern expression, showing that the threefold truth is not just classic but still very much current. In a sense it is a contemporary application of classical "truths" analogous to the attempt by Kyoto School philosophers to reinterpret Buddhist teachings in the context of modern philosophy by introducing terms such as "absolute nothingness." With this in mind, let us now take a look at Nishitani's thought—in particular his use of the terms "absolute nothingness" and "emptiness"—and see how it compares to this classic Buddhist formulation of the threefold truth.

#### NISHITANI, ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS, AND EMPTINESS

The use of the term "absolute nothingness" is one of the defining features of the Kyoto School: as Nishitani points out, "the philosophies [of Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime] share a distinctive and common basis that sets them apart from traditional Western philosophy: absolute nothingness."<sup>4</sup> Nishitani himself is no exception, and the English translators did him a service in retitling his book *Religion and Nothingness*.<sup>5</sup> A close inspection of Nishitani's discussion, however, reveals that the apparently negative term "absolute nothingness" refers to much the same as what is meant in classical Mahāyāna Buddhism by the terms "emptiness" and the "middle," as well as comparable ideas from the Christian mystic tradition.<sup>6</sup> For example, in *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani is at pains to point out that "This emptiness, or śūnyatā, is another thing altogether from the nihility of nihilism" (p. 95), and that

<sup>4</sup> See Nishitani's essay on "The Philosophies of Nishida and Tanabe" in *Nishida Kitarō* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> The original Japanese title was *Shūkyō to wa nani ka* [What is Religion?], but when the book was translated into English it was felt that "religion and nothingness" more accurately reflected the contents and was a "more suitable alternative" (see translator's introduction, p. xlii). Page numbers after quotes from Nishitani refer to this text unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>6</sup> Nishitani points out, for example, that "Absolute nothingness signals, for Eckhart, the point at which all modes of being are transcended, at which not only the various modes of created being but even the modes of divine being—such as Creator or Divine Love—are transcended" (*Religion and Nothingness*, p. 61).



nihilicity . . . is a nothingness represented from the side of being, a nothingness set in opposition to being, a *relative nothingness*. And this brings us to the necessity of having nihilicity go a step further and convert to śūnyatā. The emptiness of śūnyatā is not an emptiness represented as some 'thing' outside of being and other than being. It is not simply an "empty nothing," but rather an *absolute nothingness*, emptied even of these representations of emptiness. And for that reason, it is at bottom one with being, even as being is at bottom one with emptiness. (p. 123)

Thus Nishitani is using the term "absolute nothingness" in contrast to a mistaken and overly negative "nothingness." "Emptiness" is not merely negative nothingness, but implies going beyond the nothingness that is the opposite of "being." In another passage Nishitani says:

Buddhism goes further to speak of "the emptiness of the nihilizing view," by which it means to stress that "absolute emptiness" in which nihilizing emptiness would itself be emptied. In this absolute emptiness, the field of consciousness that looks upon the self and things as merely internal or external realities, and the nihilicity set up at the ground of this field, can for the first time be overstepped. (p. 34)

Again,

to speak of nothingness as standing "behind" person does not imply a duality between nothingness and person. In describing this nothingness as "something" wholly other, we do not mean that there is actually some "thing" that is wholly other. Rather, true nothingness means that there is no thing that is nothingness, and this is *absolute nothingness*. "Nothingness" is generally forced into a relationship with "being" and made to serve as its negation, leading to its conception as something that "is" nothingness because it "is not" being. (p. 70)

This last passage is reminiscent of Chih-i's handling of "nothingness" (*wu*) and "being" (*yu*), except that Chih-i opted to describe "true nothingness" in terms of emptiness, the conventional, and the middle instead of "absolute nothingness." Both are concerned to point out that Buddhist nothingness/emptiness is not merely a denial of being. Further, Nishitani does not ignore the importance of what Chih-i calls the "conventional," and the acting out on the phenomenological level. "Emptiness" is not negative, and Nishitani asserts that "the field of śūnyatā is nothing other than the field of the Great Affirma-

tion" (p. 131). And in a passage emphasizing the necessity of action in the world and the "manifestation" of absolute nothingness, Nishitani specifically makes a small bow in the direction of the T'ien-t'ai/Tendai formulation:

The shift of man as person from person-centered self-prehension to self-revelation as the manifestation of absolute nothingness requires an existential conversion, a change of heart within man himself. . . . In this kind of existential conversion, the self does not cease being a personal being. What is left behind is only the person-centered mode of grasping *person*, that is, the mode of being wherein the person is caught up in itself. In that very conversion the personal mode of being becomes more real, draws closer to the self, and appears in its true suchness. . . . In this sense we can understand person as *persona*—the "face" that an actor puts on to indicate the role he is to play on stage—but only as the *persona* of absolute nothingness. . . . But at the same time it is in the most elemental sense an "illusion" precisely because it is the highest mode of being, constituted in unison with absolute nothingness and becoming manifest as such. Man thus comes into being as an absolute nothingness-*sive*-being rooted elementally in the personal mode of being. In the terms of the Tendai school of Buddhism, man comes into being as the "middle" between "illusion" and "emptiness." (p. 70)

This is explained further in a later passage:

Therefore, the elemental mode of being, as such, is illusory appearance. And things themselves, as such, are phenomena. Consequently, when we speak of illusory appearance, we do not mean that there are real beings in addition that merely happen to adopt illusory guises to appear in. Precisely because it is *appearance*, and not *something* that appears, this appearance is illusory at the elemental level in its very reality, and real in its very illusoriness. In my view, we can use the term the ancients used, "the middle," to denote this, since it is a term that seems to bring out the distinctive feature of the mode of being of things in themselves. (p. 129)

The "ancients" here refer not only to T'ien-t'ai but also to Mādhyāmika thought and even classical Mahāyāna Buddhist thought in general. The negative implications of emptiness are thus tempered by realizing the "reality" of the conventional appearance of phenomena "as-they-are." This is clear in a later passage:

When we say that our self in itself is most elementally "middle,"



we are not thinking in terms of the "middle" that Aristotle, for instance, spoke of as the "mean" between too much and too little. Nor are we thinking of the role of go-between that Hegel attributed to reason as a "mediation" between contradictories. Whereas these are both "middles" projected on the field of reason, the "middle" seen as a mode of being on the field of emptiness cannot be projected on any other field whatsoever. It is immediately present—and immediately realized as such—at the point that we ourselves actually are. It is "at hand" for us and "underfoot." Just as no one else can see for us or hear for us, so too *none* of our actions can be performed by proxy. All actions imply, as it were, an absolute immediacy. And it is there that what we are calling the "middle" appears. (p. 166)

From the perspective of the classic T'ien-t'ai Buddhist formulation, then, Nishitani's philosophical standpoint comes across as very "orthodox" and quite in line with the threefold truth pattern. This came as somewhat of a surprise to me, for I began research on this topic with the expectation of writing a critique of Nishitani's Buddhism as falling short of the classic Buddhist formulations. Nishitani, however, fully in line with classic Mahāyāna thought, agrees that whether expressed as "absolute nothingness" or "middle," the point is to go beyond the extremes of nihility and substantive Being, and to find significance in positive action in and through the conventional world that involves both wisdom and compassion. The main difference between Nishitani and the classic threefold truth formulation (at least on this point), is a question of terminology, with Nishitani using terms such as "absolute nothingness."

The only question, then, is, why "absolute nothingness"? Why does the Kyoto School emphasize the use of strongly negative terminology such as "absolute nothingness" instead of being satisfied or more strongly asserting and reassessing positive classical Buddhist expressions such as "emptiness," the "middle," "becoming manifest," "absolute affirmation," and so forth? Is it due to their attempt to deal with the problem of nihilism? Are they concerned to develop a new vocabulary beyond traditional Buddhist rhetoric in their attempt to deal with Western philosophy? I suspect that in fact the culprit is the Ch'an/Zen tradition, which reverted to a habitual use of *wu/mu*/nothingness rhetoric despite the transcendence of the *wu-yu* (being-nothingness) cul-de-sac achieved by Chih-i through the threefold truth formulation.<sup>7</sup> At least in the case of Nishitani, the Kyoto School philosophers have appropriated the Zen

<sup>7</sup> The popularity of the "*Wu/mu* Koan" ("Does a dog have Buddha nature?") is only the most obvious example.



*mu*/nothingness rhetoric but have tried to go beyond it and provide for affirmation of the conventional world, and compassionate action therein, by introducing the term "absolute nothingness."

The influence of Zen thought and practice on Nishida Kitarō and other members of the Kyoto School, including Nishitani, is well known. Nishitani himself, though he remained content to call himself a "Buddhist in the making," had completed the full course of Zen training. However, it is to Nishitani's credit that he "re-converts" to more positive expressions such as emptiness, middle, and even "absolute affirmation" rather than limiting himself to the (still negative) terminology of (absolute) nothingness. In this sense we could say that he is more "fully" Buddhist than the surface meaning of the *mu* rhetoric in the Zen tradition.

In sum, the key to evaluating (religiously, if not philosophically) the success of Nishitani's (and the Kyoto School's) rhetoric of absolute nothingness in terms of classical Buddhist thought is to query whether it allows sufficiently for positive manifestation, for the affirmation of the conventional, and (ultimately) for the actual living out of compassion. One could go further and hope not only for it to "allow" but to "encourage," "inspire" or even "necessitate" positive expression. Nishitani calls for "an existential conversion," (p. 70), "becoming manifest" (p. 71), "showing Great Compassion" (p. 75), and "taking up the struggle" (against nihilism).<sup>8</sup> If the rhetoric of philosophical nothingness inspires positive expression through compassionate action in the conventional world, then "absolute nothingness" is not merely negative but, like the classic Mahāyāna ideal, a middle way that incorporates both emptiness and conventionality.

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<sup>8</sup> See Nishitani's *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 181.

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