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Response to Joan Stambaugh's "Transcendence"

FREDERICK FRANCK

Right views are called transcendent,
Wrong views are called worldly.
When right and wrong views are dismissed,
the essence of Bodhi appears.

—HUI NENG

DEAR PROFESSOR STAMBAUGH:

I AM WRITING THIS in response to and out of gratitude for your essay in the Spring Issue of 1995. It arrived according to hallowed tradition in time for Christmas—and set off a chain reaction of free associations and thoughts.

I was first struck by your opening statement that "it would appear that transcendence is out of fashion." "Well," I thought, "if that is so, so am I, and that should not be too traumatic at 86!" But almost at once you reassured me that this outmoded transcendence was exactly of the type I had discarded as illusory many years ago, and that what replaced it: an experientially arrived-at transcendence is, as your essay implied, very close to what Karl Jaspers called so felicitously "the encompassing by which everything is simultaneously permeated." How could this have escaped me when, long ago, I read Jaspers? Maybe I was just too young . . . But being reminded of it "the encompassing" took its place at once in that small covey of trigger words that act as road signs on our way, pointing in the direction of Reality. Jaspers' "Encompassing"—I spontaneously capitalized it here—is as you emphasize, "no particular being or thing but that within which all things are—"have their being"—and moreover that it is not a "something," it is a transcendence indeed "not to be looked for beyond the world." It is therefore so radically *diesseitig* that one may well call it non-metaphysical, or perhaps anti-substantialist—metaphysical. Being neither philosopher, theologian nor Zen scholar, my response can not be but purely experiential. Hence I hope that transgressions against academic correctness may be excused. Let me therefore avow at once that reading and reflecting on your characterization of "the encompassing" I

found a most welcome clarification and confirmation of what over the years I had experienced, "seen into" rather than merely thought out, and that, for instance, had radically demolished the dichotomy between what is conventionally categorized as "the natural" in contrast to "the supernatural." The nature of this "seeing into"—I gratefully acknowledge it—was no doubt influenced by my reading and re-reading ever since the late forties almost everything D.T. Suzuki wrote, especially the two wonderful lectures he gave to Emperor Hirohito after the defeat of Japan (*Essence of Buddhism*),* and my single long conversation with this great human being in 1953. Ever since, transcendence has proven itself to be perceptible on this side of an imaginary Great Divide. It was a transcendence, however, that did not parade itself, nor even reveal itself, to the casual onlooker. It had to be *seen*, it required a particular mode of seeing that is literally the very opposite of our habitual looking-at things. In this intense mode of seeing trees, faces, hillocks seem indeed to become so transparent that they are, as it were, seen from their inside out, so that one becomes aware of being unseparated from, of participating in things, to the extent of identifying with, what is seen.

I was by mere chance initiated into this mode of seeing early in life by . . . my grandfather's "stereopticon." It was a device, into which two identical photographs were placed—of a horse, a tree, a couple of lovers on a bench—and when you looked through the stereopticon's lens what you saw were no longer flat photographic images of horse, tree or couple, they sprang to three-dimensional life. It was as if your eyes had been awakened. This was amazing, but even more astonishing was it to discover that, even without any apparatus, you could see things "stereoptically"! A never-to-be forgotten poplar, came first. I saw it standing there in its three-dimensional aliveness. It was no longer "a" poplar, it had become that particular poplar, that unique, *einmalig* being, my equal, each one of us, in our own way, rooted in the same earth. I had seen the poplar from its inside out, it had become transparent.

I trained myself assiduously in this revelatory, so enriching, seeing of things in 3-D. Soon the 3-D seeing became even 4-D, four-dimensional: a time factor was added to it, the existence time of each thing: my beloved poplar would have to die one day! So would I, so would my parents. The mortality of every living being had announced itself quite frighteningly. Abundant life and transitoriness had become simultaneously visible in this mode of seeing! I would surely not have understood anything about "Nothingness," "Suchness," "Emptiness," but if someone had spoken of "the encompassing," I might, however vaguely, have sensed its meaning.

It became ever clearer that this transparency, in which things revealed them-

* *Essence of Buddhism*, The Buddhist Society, London, 1947.

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selves as if seen from their inside out, was not due to some diaphanous quality of their structure. It was due to the quality of a seeing that pierces their opaque shell until the shell collapses and the thing becomes "transparent." At that moment I have "become all eye," the subject/object shell has collapsed. Little Me is in freewheel, the eye has become I, I have become the eye . . . and it becomes clear that little Me, the onlooker, the ego that can only look-at things is actually blind as a bat. To what? To the real!

Not that this seeing always makes you "happy" I learned, it can be exquisitely painful: the encompassing isn't chocolate fudge. Space permitting I may add a few more words about this mode of seeing, particularly in relation to drawing. But first: you write "The encompassing to which I transcend is in no sense of the word any kind of Being" and "it is only to be obtained by taking the existential leap from the immanence in which I am trapped to transcendence," and that "in this leap to transcendence I become free." Free from what? I wondered, and the answer came: Free from nonsense! Free from all those superstitions, concepts and delusions that diminish life, that cancel out our specifically Human potentialities of insight, empathy, compassion. The dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural I mentioned, may be just one of these: as if the natural were not supernatural enough! As if living, sheer being alive were not "wondrous being"! As if life as such were not its own meaning. As if reality as such were not "ultimate," however distorted, hidden behind our congenital *avidya*.

Avidya, it occurs to me at this moment, might perhaps have its somatic locus in our left brain, that thinking, calculating, conceptualizing, verbalizing left hemisphere, where it might well be coupled with the empirical ego in its narcissism and ruthlessness. Could not this ego, fated as it is to collide sooner or later with the unyielding wall of reality, at the moment of this collision collapse, so that we may have a first perception of the encompassing?

It strikes me here that those "trigger words": Hisamatsu's Formless, Nishitani's Absolute Nothingness, D. T. Suzuki's *yathabhutam*—"seeing all such as it is"—are more than road signs, that they can act as powerful wake-up calls, peremptory reminders to resist all temptation to objectify what can not be objectified and to conceptualize what refuses conceptualization. For this is the temptation which all religious institutions have failed to resist, as if it were their hereditary flaw to freeze, to immobilize what is most pulsing and life-giving. It is what makes me distrust institutions, whether church or Zen center. It is also what makes me allergic to all self-labeling, whether religious, ethnic, or national.

"What are you?" can indeed only be answered with "I am no what!" Hence I could not even assert being, as Nishitani did—perhaps not without a hint of irony—"ein werdender Christ, ein gewordener Buddhist," even

though the most Christic and the most Buddhist insights are what I value so reverently, so highly.

You mention Nishitani's touching "the difficult question of the personal in God," and his "proceeding cautiously in the direction of finding something like a transpersonal dimension of God, in which he had at least one predecessor, Meister Eckhart, with his notion of the Godhead, this *Gottheit* above God, beyond the Trinity of Persons . . ."

Presumptuous as it may seem, I feel very close to home here, being the incurable borderline case who from childhood has lived in the no-man's land between two worlds: the A=A world of theology/philosophy—hence either virulently theistic or atheistic—and that other world in which "A=not-A and is therefore A," and hence so calmly non-theistic. To be non-theistic does not imply denying the Sacred: even in Bodhidharma's "Nothing Sacred, Sire, all great Emptiness" I discern the Sacred, be it in his own idiosyncratic code. For the borderline case I happen to be the two worlds are not irreconcilable at all, whatever theological tantrums this may cause: they are complementary, perhaps mutually corrective. But aren't we playing a game here with hypostatized words? Eckhart's sayings "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me" and his "God's Ground is my Ground, My Ground is God's Ground" have resonated in me as long as I can remember. Simone Weil—borderline case *par excellence*—did not approach Nishitani's "difficult question" as cautiously. She answered it, on the threshold of the Church which she—nor I—ever joined, in just seven words: "God is personal and non-personal and neither."

On this personal/impersonal theme I have puzzled and puzzled with regard to the Trikaya. How in its radical *diesseitigkeit*, its *anatta*, could Mahayana have tolerated the personification of Dharmakaya, Samboghakaya, Nirmanakaya, this triple "incarnation," however rationalized? Of course I never solved the puzzle that is no puzzle the left brain can solve. It solved itself one day when the Trikaya revealed itself to be an artistic/creative hymnody, a poetic tour de force, a Three Part Invention, one of those mysterious summits of the human Spirit as are the *ji-ji-muge-hokkai* of Kegon in the East, the Holy Spirit in the West, and the greatest works of art, Bach's Art of the Fugue, Beethoven's Opus 131, Rembrandt's Emmaus and—this suddenly springs to mind—Medardo Rosso's wondrous sculptures executed in wax, most perishable of materials as if the Unborn had whispered in the artist's ear: "Medardo! Now show emptiness taking form and show Buddha Nature being impermanence!" He did, and miraculously these meltable epiphanies can still be seen intact in a Venetian museum, a hundred years later.

Returning to your essay once more: I discern what may be the essence of

The mask of ego, closed

The mask of ego opened, revealing the Original Face

Nishitani's thought, where you quote him as saying "the personal as appearing from that which can not itself be called personal and which points at that Absolute Nothingness which contains neither form nor confinement, that is Wholly Other than Person, yet is not some "thing" different from Person and brings Person into being . . . When the Person-centered mode of being is dropped, personality becomes the "mask" behind which there is indeed Absolutely Nothing. "If this No-thingness is thought of, is objectified, it becomes a mere idea. It must be lived existentially."

At this point I look-at the photograph of one of my many sculptures on the theme of that mask. Here the mask opens up to show—if not Absolute Nothingness—Hui Neng's Original Face. The mask hides the Original Face of our Nothingness. As I was forging it out of steel it acted as a powerful catalyst in the realization that the false, self-pitying "I am nothing," stands corrected by "Nothingness is me," a vision of Self and Other that is so wonderfully capsulated in the Enen and Ejaku story (E.B. 22-1:35-36). The mask remains indeed utterly opaque until it becomes "transparent" to what "in the eye acts as sight, in the ear acts as hearing" to quote Rinzai. And this brings me to those "few more words on seeing" in relation to drawing. For it is this mode of seeing and drawing which, for better or worse, has become my heterodox zazen. Drawing proved to be an immense intensification of seeing, so that the seeing and the drawing can fuse into that single, undivided act I called seeing/drawing. The speed and directness of seeing/drawing excludes all "thinking." It has resulted in thousands of drawings done on all five continents, drawings never intended for exhibitions nor as illustrations. They are sheer witness to seeing, mere precipitations on paper of that mode of seeing in which every tree, every face in a crowd becomes my koan; and, as any koan, only to be solved by becoming the koan, becoming that tree, face, bird flying. No roshi is needed to judge the koan's solution or failure, for every trick, every artistic device, every shortcut stares one in the face. I have written three books trying to clarify "seeing/drawing as meditation" still it resists being verbalized. "The Meaning of life is to See," Hui Neng said and drawing constantly confirms it. What I can add here must remain anecdotic: drawing in downtown New York, Amsterdam or Paris, seeing those thousands of masks moving, each one becomes absolutely unique, *einmalig*, as unequal as they are equivalent. The image that appears on the paper is indeed the image that falls on the retina. But is rerouted from the usual itinerary eye-to-brain where it is processed, named, categorized. Instead that image is somehow transmitted directly, im-mediately from eye to hand to pen or pencil, so that every dot, every stroke on the paper has gone through one's every cell to the hand that registers, seismographically, the tremors on the retina, tracing a graph. That graph is my drawing! I sometimes think this process may be related to what Nishida

calls "pure experiencing." Drawing the black fly dying on the windowsill, lying on its back, resignedly rubbing its hands, its feet, I share its being/non-being.

"Oh kill it not," says Issa's haiku.

As I am ending this all too long response to your splendid essay that capsules so much of what Matters, from Nishida's "self-identity" of absolute contradiction to Nishitani's "a thing is itself in not being itself, for it is an affirmation of each being on the homeground of Emptiness inherent in which is the identity of reality and illusion," and to Jaspers' so significant finding of "something" that can not be objectified, nor represented and yet describes a kind of action, the "Encompassing."

My eye falls on a note on my desk: "Plants and trees, rivers and streams and this hand noting it down are the manifestations of the Dharmakaya." And then, scribbled in a corner as if echoed from childhood "This is my Body"! Becoming one with the world we touch the truth of the Universe.

Please forgive this unavoidably endless string of words by way of "thank you."

Frederick Franck