

# My Teacher

UEDA SHIZUTERU

NISHITANI KEIJI passed away in his sleep during the night of November 23, 1990. His peaceful entrance into death exemplified the Buddhist expression for this moment, *jijaku* 示寂, “manifesting tranquillity.” When I reflect on the ninety years that he lived, I cannot help being struck by the scale of his life and by the remarkable freedom manifested by his personality.

Nishitani Sensei began his career in philosophy under the tutelage of Nishida Kitarō. Although he was deeply rooted in the philosophical and religious traditions of the East, he was, if anything, an even more knowledgeable student of Western thought, from the earliest Greek philosophers to the contemporary thinkers of Europe and America. His philosophical concern was always personal and existential, and led him, in his words, “on a path of overcoming nihilism by fathoming its depths.” In this way confronting one of the fundamental problems of the modern age, he embarked on a career that would unfold into a great river of thought as deep as it was wide. He was never in a rush to put his thoughts into print, yet twenty-six volumes of his writings now have been published in a collected edition, covering almost the entire range of problems related to philosophy and religion.

There is of course more to Nishitani Sensei than the recorded legacy of thought contained in those works. Those of us who were privileged to study under him have been deeply affected by the unforgettable impact of our encounters with him, the words of wisdom he imparted to us, the expressions on his face, his silences, the piercing illumination of his insights, the force of his personality, all of it arising ultimately from the wellsprings of life itself.

Writing thirty years after his own teacher Nishida Kitarō passed away, he said, “Even now I tremble when I think of him.” We can see

from this that he was in a sense always face to face with his former mentor. Now a similar encounter begins for his students, even after his departure. In fact, precisely because he is no longer here in a physical sense, the impact on us of coming to grips with his existence is all the greater, as if that existence were now intensified and purified to an almost painful degree. In this rarefied atmosphere there remains a sense of his subtle but distinct presence, like the faint perfume from a single white camellia.

On November 24, 1991, I returned from a two-week trip to the United States. As the airplane came to a stop at the gate at Tokyo Airport, I heard myself being paged over the loudspeaker. I was informed Nishitani Sensei had died earlier that same morning. Since he was over ninety, we all knew the time was near. But when it finally came, I was dumbfounded, as though something impossible had suddenly come to pass. But more remarkable than that momentary surprise was the simple fact that I had encountered him, that in this my one and only life I had been able to meet a person whom I could follow as a lifelong teacher.

In the fall of 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, I attended a lecture Professor Nishitani delivered at the Daiichi Kōtō Gakkō in Tokyo. I was in my freshman year. I waited seated in the audience, knowing nothing about him. He had come all the way from Kyoto for the lecture, despite the almost intolerable wartime traveling conditions. He appeared on the podium dressed in a kimono, a rare sight in those days. Yet he did not look out of place and in fact his appearance seemed quite natural. At the same time, there was something different about him; he seemed untouched by the turmoil of the time. I remember almost nothing of what he said then, but I still cannot forget that day when he came into my life from a place unknown to me. I was eighteen at the time. Since then nearly a half century has elapsed.

I entered Kyoto Imperial University in April of 1945, just months before Japan's surrender to the Allied forces. I went there to study with Professor Nishitani. It was as though the choice had been made for me, that there was really no question of going anywhere else. I was drafted into the army almost immediately but was able to return to my studies the following year. After that I had the good fortune of studying closely with him for forty-five years. To be close to him, however, did not mean that I became used to or familiar with him in the way that

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one might with others. In the Confucian *Analects* there is a description of the sage that closely fits Professor Nishitani: "He appears awesome when seen from afar, kind when near, and stern when he speaks." Although there was not a trace of stiffness in his personality, at his core there was something strong and unyielding; although he was always among us, he appeared to be breathing a different air.

He was not strict with us in the ordinary sense of the word. In fact he was flexible and magnanimous. But when we failed to be clear or firm, just one word uttered by him would strike home like a bolt of lightning. I remember so often speaking to him about some problem or other I had on my mind. He would listen quietly, and when I had finished, he would simply say, "And then?" At that instant it would become painfully apparent to me that I had never been clear in my own mind about the point I was trying to make. In going to speak with him, I had run up against my own existence, my own doubts. Months later, sometimes years later, I would realize that the doubts which he had laid bare had signaled the emergence of a resolution.

One time, I came to a point in my life when everything I was doing became empty and colorless. I went to see Nishitani Sensei and we were talking about something else, and the words just came out like a heavy sigh: "Everything has turned gray. For the first time in my life I feel negative about everything."

"That's good," he replied. His words hit me like a dash of cold water. His utterances worked in this way, like keys opening up locks in the mind. But he did not turn the key himself. He gave them to us and pointed out the existence of the keyholes in our locks. By no means answers, they were more like pointers that enabled us to question ourselves. Although some of us were on quite familiar terms with him, there was always a sense that none of us really knew him, or what he would do or say.

Of many memorable experiences, there is one that stands out for the unexpected glimpse it provided me into the deeper sources of Nishitani Sensei's existence. I was still a graduate student and had accompanied him on a trip he made to Mount Kōya. We stayed at a Shingon temple. One evening, as the skies were darkening, I noticed that the light in his room was not on, although it didn't seem as though he had gone out. I wondered what he was doing, and as I had something to ask him anyway, I went to his room. As I approached, there was a sense of elec-

tricity in the air; it felt as though the gaping darkness of the room was spilling out of the open sliding doors and spreading out boundlessly. I could not see Professor Nishitani; there was only the darkness which was, paradoxically, transparent. There was nothing distorting this transparency. For an instant, it felt as though I had been cut open and exposed by the power of this utterly transparent darkness. Then I saw his silhouette. He was sitting in meditation. He got up and turned on the light. The infinite darkness was suddenly transformed into a warm and boundless light; once I saw his familiar face I felt completely at ease. This was the first time that I had been exposed to the phenomenon of zazen. The impression the experience left upon me was no doubt deeper than it otherwise might have been, due to its singular nature. I learned much later that he had been a lay practitioner of Zen at the training monastery of Shōkoku-ji for many years. He had been given the Buddhist name "Keisei," or "Voice of the Valley Stream." At his funeral, held at Shōkoku-ji in Kyoto on November 26, 1990, the posthumous name he had been given was used: "Sairai-in Kōoku Keisei Koji," which may be rendered, somewhat awkwardly, as "Voice of the Valley Stream Layman Coming from the West, Sounding in the Valley of Emptiness."

Nishitani's thought drew upon the classics of Asian traditions including Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as well as upon the whole range of Western thought. He translated and wrote essays and monographs on Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Boehme, Descartes, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, and others.<sup>1</sup> He wrote on figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi and the Zen poets Han-shan (Kanzan) and Shih-te (Jittoku), and on the institutional problems of Buddhism and Christianity.

He pursued each subject with a passion for both scholarly precision

<sup>1</sup> Nishitani pioneered the translation of the classics of Western philosophy into Japanese, and many that he did are still regarded as the best translations available. For example, Schelling's *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), translated when he was twenty-six (*Ningenteki jiyū no hon-shitsu*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1926). A number of German terms could only be rendered by the creation of new Japanese equivalents, many of which later became part of the standard vocabulary of Japanese philosophy and even found their way into colloquial usage. An example is *shutaisei*, "subjectivity," which was first introduced through Nishitani's translation of Kierkegaard's works.

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and personal engagement, but his energy was greatest when focused on issues pertaining to the encounter of East and West. Just as Japan during his lifetime was experiencing the tension brought on by the rapid introduction of Western culture, he found in his personal quest for self-understanding that he was torn between the newly imported ideas and the native Japanese traditions. The power of much of his thought derives from an effort to synthesize the two into a greater whole. It is the creative tension behind this effort which gives his thought a dimension that goes beyond what would otherwise have been an extensive and profound study of individual thinkers. One of the essays which exemplifies this creativity is "Science and Zen," written in his later years. In it the enormity of the problems involving rationality and belief, philosophy and religion, and nihilism and mysticism are brought into sharp focus. Without so much providing an answer, it throws into relief the dilemma of having to find a ground of commensurability while acknowledging the vast incommensurabilities involved. In a short space, one is made to see the multiplicity and complexity of the problems. An outstanding characteristic of his thought is the way in which it takes on issues of such scale and deals with them with penetrating insight and clarity.

This thought process can be seen as early as his graduation thesis on Schelling and Bergson. A number of the themes he dealt with there are further developed in an essay on Nietzsche and Eckhart, written during his years in Germany while he was studying with Martin Heidegger. These unusual pairings are indicative of Nishitani's unique synthetic capability, and his efforts spurred Japanese intellectuals to rethink their own self-understanding in the context of world thought.

The problem dealt with in his study of Schelling and Bergson has to do with the relation between cognition and sensation in intuition. It is a theme inspired by Nishida's examination of experience and is present in germinal form in his first attempts at philosophy in *A Study of Good*. In his work on Nietzsche and Eckhart, Nishitani investigates the nature of nihilism when it is taken to its thoroughgoing conclusions, to a point where the freedom of a life grounded in utter groundlessness is realized. This can be seen as the development of Nishida's philosophy of absolute nothingness as it is manifested through Nishitani's own analysis of nihilism.

The comparative studies of these two unusual pairings, Schelling and

Bergson, Nietzsche and Eckhart, provide glimpses of the fundamental problem and insight guiding Nishitani's philosophy in its mature phase. The problem consists of radicalizing and concretizing the freedom of the subject as it traces a trajectory through nihilism and mysticism. The insight is based on the standpoint of emptiness in the Mahayana tradition and its actualization in Zen.

It is these concerns that underlie works such as *The Philosophy of Fundamental Subjectivity*, *Nihilism*, *God and Absolute Nothingness*, *What is Religion?* and *The Standpoint of Zen*. His thought can be likened to a mountain; it looms larger the closer one gets, rising up from unfathomable depths and towering into the vast open sky.

Yet Nishitani Sensei himself seemed oblivious to the scale of his own thought. To him its development was a natural process, and he moved through the most complex dialectics as easily as a spring breeze. The great problem of existence was absorbed into his life as the simple unfolding of his own nature, and he became, in the very midst of his philosophizing, the *zetsugaku mui no kandō nin* who appears in the Zen poem *Shōdōka*, "Song of Enlightenment," and who is aptly described in Suzuki Daisetz's rendering as "that leisurely philosopher who has gone beyond learning and needs not exert himself in anything." Nishitani Sensei used such phrases as "the vastness of time" and "wind-like existence" to describe a philosophical vision, but he was expressing the spontaneity and freedom of his own life as much as ideas of philosophy.

Nishitani has left our midst, but his thought will continue to grow in significance as the world and our existence in it become ever more problematic. Since the translation of *Shūkyō to wa nanika* into English and German respectively, Nishitani's contributions to world philosophy and religious thought have been receiving progressively greater notice. The original title of this work means, "What is religion?" and it is no accident that it takes the form of a question. In our contemporary situation where there is, so to speak, no religion, and in our religions which fail to respond to the contemporary situation, we live in a no-man's-land where existence becomes a question unto itself. This is the territory through which Nishitani wends his way, from nihilism to its thoroughgoing negation and on to the possibility of freedom in the radical affirmation of life. He mobilizes the Buddhist concept of emptiness and reexamines many of the fundamental notions of European

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philosophy and Christianity, giving new life and meaning to the thought of both the East and the West. He has been called both a Buddhist thinker shaped by Western philosophy and a Western philosopher influenced by Buddhism. Both these characterizations contain a certain truth; paradoxically in fact, both are valid, and it is only in seeing the one in light of the other that we can gain an adequate appreciation of his work.

His thought, however, represents only part of the story. An American theologian told me about a visit he had made to see Nishitani Sensei. What impressed him more than anything else, he said, was the manner in which Nishitani Sensei carefully examined a book of landscape photographs that he had given him. This ordinary act transported them into a different time, a different place, a deeper reality renewed moment by moment.

A year and a half since he passed away, both his presence and absence loom ever larger. I conclude with the following verse which was among his favorites:

Verdant mountains	<i>Enzan mugen</i>
In the distance	<i>heki sōsō.</i>
Unfold endlessly,	
One behind another.	