

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

from or prior to such distinction. All values arise in such immediate experience, and, if they are of the sort to which Nishida and the garden architect, and the poet gave expression, they arise out of the pre-intentionality of 'pure experience'."

It was with these words, from the painting of plum blossoms by the Yangtze, that he inscribed my copy of *Religion and Nothingness*, so that our philosophical encounter, our "discontinuity" in time would be well marked. It was now three hours later, and Nishitani Sensei walked with me from his house, seemingly as reluctant to end our time together as I was, and he walked with me up a steep and long stairway near his house, to an old Shinto shrine, where we chatted for a few minutes more. We walked back down to the street, where the taxi that he had called was waiting for me. Standing in his grey-black *yukata*, cane in hand, he waved good-bye in the Kyoto dusk. I shall not soon forget this man, whose life illustrates better than most just how uniquely worthwhile a human life can become.

### The Man of the Circle: A Table Talk—1984

Hakan Eilert

At the Center for the Study of Japanese Religions (NCC) we learned that Professor Nishitani, then retired, would be willing to attend the informal discussions we held, so we used to invite him to the Center, where we students of religion met regularly to discuss his newly translated book, *Religion and Nothingness*.

He would appear about half an hour late, dressed in traditional Japanese dress, looking very down to earth. He seemed somewhat disoriented as he entered the room, and asked shyly if this was where he was supposed to be. He carried a plastic bag with his cigarettes—his favorite brand was Lark—and a lighter. He placed the dark red package in front of him on the table, asked with a smile if he was allowed to smoke, and started to dig for the lighter. The utter unpretentiousness of his personality filled the room.

He listened with unattentive attentiveness to our brief words of welcome as we told him that we had read his book, *Religion and Nothingness*, that we were thrilled by his insights, and that we felt deeply honored by his agreeing to spend some time with us.

## REMINISCENCES

Then, without unnecessary preliminaries, he started to speak. It seemed as though he gave voice to an ongoing thought process within him, like a person to whom philosophizing is as much a natural function of the body as breathing or digestion.

Religion is a human and universal heritage, he said. It is the air we breathe and we are all of us grounded in such a dimension whether we are aware of it or not.

He alluded to the well-known Zen saying: "Always at home, always on the way. Neither on the way, nor at home." He pointed out that there is a homeground which can never be claimed by rational thinking—a realm which reverberates in heaven and earth. And, he said, to find this place is the challenge of each person.

Remember, he continued after some time had elapsed, that the founders of religion—Jesus, the Buddha—were actually anti-religion persons. Their quest was to break out of religion in the name of religion. The Indian milieu of the Buddha gave him tools to work out new religious expressions. Today Christianity stands out against the background of Buddhism—a religion much older than the Christian way.

He believed that it was necessary for us to interpret Christianity by means of Buddhism.

Occasionally we may encounter persons who have integrated religion in a way which makes any particularity vanish. There are such people in Japan—*myōkōnin*, the unlettered "people of pure hearts" of the Pure Land faith. With them religion ceases to be doctrinal, theological.

"Is religion then outdated, a hindrance, an unnecessary addendum?" somebody asked.

The smoke from the cigarette formed a rising zigzag pattern. Nishitani turned his words over . . . once, twice. After a while he began to speak in his hushed voice:

Today's problem is basically a religious one. To be precise, it is the anti-religious attitude which causes the problem in our modern world. Humankind does not know where to turn. Any student of religion must take this problem seriously. But the essential theme is not a theoretical one—to discourse about secularization and how it came about. We must become aware of the mental problem inculcated into present day society and history. It is the fundamental task of every religion to solve this problem.

It is not enough to understand the teachings of Buddhism, Zen, and so on, in a traditional sense. There is an evolving movement within each religion which points at new horizons, new insights.

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

What is Zen? What is Christianity? A new development within each traditional religion must be discovered.

Due to emergence of natural science the relevance of traditional religious answers seems to have collapsed. We experience a re-evaluation of all values, bringing about changes in our understanding of culture and ethics. Religious worldviews lose their power. The result is nihilism. In Nietzsche's view "*der Wille zur Macht*" is the fundamental characteristic of life. But we need to transcend the nihilism of the modern world. Like religious exotericisms, it is a relative truth. The logical outcome of Christianity leads to a kind of *Wahrhaftigkeit*. In my own case, it was the *Wahrhaftigkeit* of Christianity which led me to nihilism. I had to search for certainty on a stance beyond Christianity and confess the death of God. . .

Heidegger and Whitehead are the greatest modern philosophers. Also Nishida. I had to go my own way; perhaps, like Heidegger, always searching how to respond to the basic situation of humankind. . . .

Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's contribution? Yes, I can understand what he is aiming at: How to transcend nihilism, the death of God, death of the Buddha.

I had many discussions with Paul Tillich. Hisamatsu and Tillich differed. Paul Tillich was always on the way, trying to define, to cut open some new way in Christianity. He always talked about the depth of reason—not a standpoint apart from reason. The going beyond takes place through the depth of reason. Notice the similarity with the Zen view. Zen is not irrational. Before Zen, Kegon and Tendai were highly philosophical, speculative sects.

When Japanese young people read the Bible I think almost all of them are left with a deep impression. Why is it then they would probably hesitate if asked to become Christians? I find myself in a similar situation. When I read the Bible, I am impressed. But the atmosphere in which Jesus lived his sermons is somehow different from the contemporary church. Where does this difference come from?

Jesus wrote in the sand. I like that incident. That sort of writing in the sand can be found among the Pure Land *myōkōnin*.

Buddhism is also challenged to break new ground. According to the Zen teaching, "you must kill the Buddha." In Christian terms, that would mean to kill all the saints. This is the most difficult thing to do. It means that all your doings or non-doings are spontaneous expressions of everyday life—this is the final truth of Zen.

This dimension of Zen is easy to overlook. To understand it

## REMINISCENCES

presents the greatest difficulty. Zen is mundane. It is everyday life—walking, working, sitting. A certain frame of mind is needed to engage in Zen practice, to do zazen. Practice is reduced to simple things like breathing, the right way of sitting. A standpoint of no-thought is essential. No images, no philosophical intuitions must appear. All must be blown away in order to become nothing. This is the most difficult point.

Look at St. Francis. He sets a meaningful example. In him there is a moving power, a field of force, a *dōki* or inner motivation. It means that every instant lays bare the eternal now as the time of action. The chance to act is now, in this very instant. It reminds us of Kierkegaard's understanding of the moment of the eternal in the present. This is the chance and possibility for the Dharma to realize itself in time, in the midst of temporality.

There is a moving power in *esse*. Do you remember the Ten Oxherding Pictures? The seventh picture is of a man who has forgotten his ox, the moon, heaven, everything. He is alone. In the eighth picture there is the circle only, unity of all living things and the Dharma; awakening and unity simultaneously joining hands.

When I was in Marburg I met and had discussions with Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Benz. We talked about the Oxherding Pictures, particularly the eighth picture, the circle. I made some comments on the meaning of the circle, about it being one and all at the same time. Unity and particularity. Emptiness and Fullness. Such is the stance of the liberated person, the man represented by the circle. Absolute Nothingness prevails. But Absolute Nothingness is also Absolute Fullness. Emptiness realizing itself as Fullness and Infinity.

I think that Bultmann understood. He said: "In Christianity there is a place where we can hear voices from heaven. In other words, the place of Nothingness is where we understand."

My father died while I was still a boy. It was a hard blow for me. Having no brothers and sisters, I was alone much of the time. I lived with my mother in Tokyo and we were very poor. After high school I could not decide what to do. Should I enter Tokyo University? Or should I go to a Zen temple and become a monk? Perhaps I should go to the countryside and live as a farmer.

Then I happened to read one of Nishida Kitarō's books, *Zen no Kenkyū* (A Study of Good). It made a deep impression on me. I decided to go to Kyoto to study with him. Already as a high school student I had read books by Nietzsche and also some works on Zen Buddhism by D. T. Suzuki. The idea of becoming a Zen monk came

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

from such readings, I suppose.

I did not practice zazen with a serious intent until ten years after I came to Kyoto. Then (about 1930) I went to Shōkoku-ji Zen temple. I never lived in the monastery. The hardest time was during the Rōhatsu training session the first week of December. No sleep was allowed during this period. At first it was very difficult for me, but after three days it became somewhat more endurable. Sometimes I would devote a whole week to sitting. Gradually I came to feel more at ease.

While reading the Sermon on the Mount it struck me that Christ's looking at the flower is perhaps similar to what is alluded to in the eighth picture of the Oxherding series. Which is the right way of seeing a flower? Where was Jesus when he said, "Look at the lilies in the field"? What was his way of seeing?

Where and how does this seeing happen? Where is the flower? The whole event is important—me, the flower, the seeing. These questions have a deep significance for religious understanding. They bring the paradoxical issues of life to our awareness. Who am I? How am I? Where is the "I" that makes "my left hand not know what my right hand does"? What kind of action is required here?

Such is the stance of the enlightened person, the man of the circle. Absolute Emptiness prevails. Your hand is empty and the other person is empty as well. . . .