

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

events came crashing down on him, they didn't seem really to affect him any more than a smattering of mud being thrown up against a car.

Another evening, we were strolling along the street in front of the School of Agriculture, and we met a person of about the same age as Sensei. Sensei appeared to be on close terms with the man. They stood and talked to each other for a long time. I was standing a short distance away from them, and after a while Sensei finished the conversation and came over to me and asked, "Do you know him?" When I replied, "No," he said, "that's Mr. So-and-so. It has been a while since I saw him last. He has really aged. The purge has certainly taken its toll on him." Even as he sympathized with another's problems, Sensei acted as though the purge itself were a subject that had to do with others and had no relation to himself.

When Peter the fisherman met Jesus, Jesus bade him to forsake all and follow Him. Just as Peter immediately followed Jesus, the day will probably soon come when I, too, will have to follow Sensei as far as I can to get where he has gone. My feeling is that it will not be easy.

### "The flower blooms on the cliff's edge"

Notto R. Thelle

Those who did not know him often shook their heads when the old man entered the circle of thinkers and philosophers. His underwear peeped out from his sleeves. In a plastic bag he carried a few slices of bread from which he broke a piece from time to time. He chain-smoked. He seemed uncertain whether or not he was he expected to say anything. He searched for words and made no haste. There was no trace of eloquence. No elegant formulations. But slowly and deliberately he circled around his theme in a continuous effort to close in on it. Some people always wondered: What is he really trying to say?

But after a while something began to happen. People around him were caught in the strange magic of wondering. They were drawn into his world and the room was filled with his presence. It was no longer a closed space. The walls disappeared and wide landscape appeared. He did not teach philosophy, but invited the participants on a philosophical journey. It was demanding, for he expected a lot from his fellow wanderers.

I met Nishitani Keiji the first time in 1972, when I was a student at Ōtani University in Kyoto, where he was teaching. For thirteen years I enjoyed his

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teaching and his friendship, meeting him regularly in seminars and lectures, formal dialogue meetings and informal gatherings. Few people have touched my life to such a degree as this gentle and wise old man.

### *The common humanity*

Before meeting Nishitani my understanding of religion had already been shattered. I had begun my study of Buddhism, and was engaged in zazen in a temple in Kyoto. I wanted to enter below the surface, and oscillated between enthusiasm and deep frustration.

The master taught me a lesson which prepared me for the encounter with Nishitani. One day he asked rather bluntly: "Why do you study Zen when you have your own prayer and contemplation?" I explained my reasons, adding politely that I thought Christians might have something to learn.

"Why are you so preoccupied with Buddhism—or with Christianity for that matter?" he asked again. I was confused. "It is raining tonight," he continued. In the quiet room we heard the soft sound of the rain falling on the moss in the garden.

Then came the impossible question: "Is it Christianity or Buddhism which is raining?" The rain gave me no answer. "It simply rains," he concluded. "The real question is that of *being*. All your speculations about Buddhism and Christianity separate you from the very basic and simple fact of being."

I did not immediately realize the full impact of this simple dialogue, but the words were glued to my mind as a constant challenge: Religious search deals with the fundamental questions of being. If faith does not relate you directly to the reality of being, it has no meaning. If the encounter with Christ has not taught me *to be* in a true way, perhaps I have never really met him.

The key to Nishitani's life and thinking was just this concern about true being. Not in the abstract sense, but in the concrete sense: What does it mean to be a true human person? Philosophical abstractions came after the basic existential concern.

Nishitani was usually classified as a Buddhist philosopher of the Kyoto School. His spiritual roots certainly penetrated deeply into Zen, and his mental universe was structured by the insights of Mahayana thought. But every time he was labelled a Buddhist, one could observe that he felt uncomfortable and, somewhat embarrassed, he tried to explain that he was searching for something more basic, beyond—or beneath—Buddhism and Christianity. He was searching for the common humanity, the basic question of what it means to be a human being. Religions, particularly Buddhism and Christianity, have treasures of insight, and provide models and concepts that enable us to deal with the problems of humanity. But Nishitani could not accept that these religions had reached their fullest expressions. A period of two or three thou-

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sand years were merely a fragment of human history, and religions have unlimited potential for further growth. Even though we are reared in these traditions and sustained by them, he argued, we have to search for truth with empty minds. Abandoning the self-assertive emphasis on our own principles, we have to grapple with the meaning of life in radical openness.

In a certain sense, it might have been easier to understand Nishitani if he had remained an Eastern philosopher satisfied with the concepts and symbols provided by Mahayana Buddhism. It was, however, his calling to journey into other worlds as well, primarily into Western philosophy and Christian thought, which he studied and taught with quiet passion and deep sympathy. His Eastern heritage was radically challenged and deepened by the encounter with the West, but the Western insights were also transformed in the process of inquiry. Sympathetic understanding and friendly encounter always went along with penetrating criticism. His search for truth was a question of life and death.

### *The abyss*

Before leaving Japan in 1985 I asked Nishitani to sign his newly published *Religion and Nothingness*. He wrote a verse which crystallized his search for meaning:

花は險処に開く

*Hana wa kensho ni hiraku*

The flower blooms on the cliff's edge

What has such poetic language to do with philosophy? It certainly expressed more than an aesthetic mood. It was the confession of a person who had dared to see the abyss open under his feet and whose meaning of life emerged out of that awareness. His philosophical search had begun with the desperate realization of nihilism. His youth had been a time without hope, a time when he had been in the grips of despair, he commented later. The decision to study philosophy was a matter of life and death. "In the little history of my soul, this decision meant a kind of conversion." Until his death he maintained that a true realization of life is possible only when one is aware of the abyss of nihilism.

Religion is not an additional touch that enhances life for the religiously minded. It has to do with life itself. Religion does not exist in order to be used for our purposes; its true meaning is revealed only when we are faced with the desperate loss of purpose, when the abyss opens up.

Expressed in Buddhist categories, nihilism is the radical awareness of illusory existence, the absence of anything absolute, constant or substantial in phenomena, things, or persons. But Nishitani seemed to be more concerned to

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express his insight through Western interpretations, or rather, through his own interpretation of Western traditions. He approached his theme in circular movements, and often repeated himself. But there were always new insights to be gained.

On his journey towards the center he found the most surprising dialogue partners. Not only the major philosophers of East and West, but great masters of faith and art, such as Jesus and Buddha, Paul and Shinran, Eckhart and Dōgen, Dostoevsky, Bashō, T. S. Eliot. And, most surprisingly, the person with whom he was speaking. He expected everyone to take his or her standpoint seriously, to be willing to test that standpoint, and to move along from that place.

Nihilism is at the center of Christian teaching, Nishitani argued. If a thing is created *ex nihilo*, it means that this nihil is more immanent in that thing than the very being of that thing is immanent in the thing itself. He related this insight to the Christian doctrine of sin and evil, and wanted to go further. He dealt with the nihilistic element in Western thought, and found that it had not been radical enough.

He affirmed the insights of nihilism, but regarded it as the calling of religion and philosophy to overcome its destructive force by breaking through to deeper dimensions. Nihilism must be transformed into a new awareness of existence, he argued. That transformation takes place when nihilism becomes the very place which opens up for a transcendental reality. Despair belongs to the dimension of transcendence. But this transcendence is not found in a divine sphere beyond the world; it involves a descent or going down into the hidden dimension of life which appears where the abysmal nihilism opens up under one's feet. Instead of transcendence he therefore coined a new word, "transcendence." Abandoning oneself to the abyss, the old ego-centered world crumbles and a new universe comes into being. The flower blooms on the cliff's edge.

### *A universe without a center*

I once had the privilege of attending a seminar on the Diamond Sutra, led by Nishitani and an expert in Sanskrit and Buddhist studies. Nishitani spent the first session commenting upon the opening words of the sutra, "Thus I have heard . . .," in Japanese *Nyozegamon*. In the first "thus" (*nyo*) he found the key to the entire sutra. Whatever was written later came from the awareness of the "thus"-ness of existence. Buddha is the Thus-Come (*tathāgata*, in Japanese, *nyorai*), because he emerges from that thusness. Approaching the text in this way, he followed Chinese traditions, enabling the thrilled students to have flashes of insight into a new mode of being. The universe was not approached from the center of the human ego, from which

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things and phenomena were dealt with by imposing an order structure around that center. Things and phenomena were allowed to exist as they were in their "thusness" of universal interrelatedness. There is no center from which things can be controlled; or rather, the center is everywhere, connected to innumerable other centers in a way that relates and defines each center as a part of the totality.

The Sanskrit scholar afterwards commented that, in fact, there was no textual basis for Nishitani's emphasis upon the opening "thus." The Sanskrit word was plainly *evam*, "in this way," and had nothing to do with the Buddhist idea of *tathā* or *tathatā*, "thus" or "thusness." Nishitani probably knew that all the time, but was confident that his somewhat arbitrary interpretation of the Sino-Japanese text revealed more of its meaning than any amount of linguistic analysis.

Usually Nishitani seemed to prefer the concept of Emptiness rather than Thusness, perhaps because it had richer connotations. On the one hand, it refers to the empty and illusory character of existence which appears when the abyss of nihilism opens up. On the other hand, it expresses the attitude of emptiness, the "letting-go" of the ego and the ego-centered world, and, further, the new universe which appears when the ego-world crumbles, open and empty in the sense that all things are interrelated and integrated.

Nishitani approached the world with Dōgen's attitude of "empty hands," apprehending the world without manipulating or grasping it. He certainly recognized an order of things, a "dharmic naturalness," but that appears only when we let things and phenomena present themselves to us, not when we approach them with our structures of reality. Alluding to the Japanese translation of the Prologue of the Gospel of John by making a pun on the terms for word or logos (*koto* or *kotoba*) and for fact, matter, or thing (*koto*), he argued that the Logos (*koto*, *kotoba*) is not a quality apart from matters, facts, or things (*koto*), but manifest in them. Or, expressed in the poetic language of Bashō:

From the pine tree  
learn (the *koto*) of the pine tree.  
And from the bamboo  
(the *koto*) of the bamboo.

Rather than proclaiming this attitude as the unique Eastern way, Nishitani was concerned to find it in the very center of Christian faith: in the "empty" love of God, who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust without partiality; in the mystery of incarnation and cross, which he saw as the self-emptying (kenotic) acts of God; in the

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teaching of Christ who said that the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing.

The dominant trend of Christianity and Western philosophy, however, he found hopelessly captivated by ego-structures. Traditional monotheism has provided Christianity with a structure of the universe which is bound to crumble in the encounter with modern science, nihilism, and atheism, he argued. The modern world cannot possibly revolve around an axis defined by the relationship between God and humanity. Not only the notion of an absolute divine Being who guides the world towards a goal is untenable; the very attempt to locate humankind as the center of the world creates a distorted relationship to reality. Nothing less than a Copernican revolution is necessary, he maintained. As the geocentric world-view shattered the understanding of the universe, the theocentric and anthropocentric world-view must be replaced by a new vision of the divine and the human. In even more dramatic terms, he compared what was taking place as a catastrophic change similar to what happened in natural history when the dry land rose up out of the sea and many sea creatures were forced to adapt to the dry land. In the case of Christianity, its adherents have to learn to exist in a world where a transcendent absolute God does not exist any more, and where there is no substantial ego as the center of action in the world.

With all his sympathy for Christianity, Nishitani thus became a ferocious critic. The present modes of Christian faith simply have no future. At the same time he acknowledged that Christian faith in a unique way had drawn the conscience and love of humanity to special depths and elevated the human personality to remarkable heights. The solution is not to discard faith, he argued, but to unfold the future from within Christianity itself. Without being trapped in words, one might assume that Nishitani envisaged a future Mahayana Christianity, or a Christian faith transformed by the encounter with Buddhism.

### *Mystagogic wisdom*

I shall never forget the encounter between a renowned Western theologian and Nishitani. The theologian came to discuss philosophical issues. He wanted to compare Buddhism and Christianity, clarify concepts, understand intellectually, analyze. Nishitani refused to accept the rules of the game, and in his quiet and insistent way prepared for a personal encounter, a dialogue on the spiritual level where no one could hide behind concepts and theologies.

Nishitani presented one of his favorite koans: "Paul says in the Letter to the Galatians that he is crucified with Christ: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' Who is saying these words?"

The theologian had his answers: "Well, one could say that it is Paul who

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speaks—in Christ. Or it could be said that Christ is speaking—through Paul.”

Nishitani was not satisfied, and pursued the issue. “Who is the *I* that is speaking?” The discussion went on for a couple of hours, and never reached any conclusion. But the theologian left the house rather bewildered and disturbed. Why had Nishitani refused his questions? What had he been aiming at?

Nishitani's philosophy was not so much a system of thought as a process of philosophizing, a constant search for wisdom and meaning. And he wanted to involve others in that process. Were it not for his extreme gentleness and humble approach, one might have been scared away by his direct, sometimes blunt questions. “What do you really mean when you say that . . . ?” The partner might be another famous thinker or a student who had hardly begun to realize the implications of the questions he raised. I have never met a Japanese intellectual who was so present to the person he was facing. I have seen him engaged in a discussion with a new student, well aware of the fact—or perhaps forgetting—that a group of professors were sitting in the same room impatiently waiting for him to join their meeting. He was practicing what he was teaching about “letting-go” of ego-structures. And in this way he enabled his partners to abandon their prejudices, forget status and credentials, and commit themselves to a common search.

Those who had the privilege of joining Nishitani on his philosophical search were often shaken by the experience. Something happened in the encounter. Ideas one had taken for granted began to seem less obvious. Theological and philosophical explanations did not protect you any more. It is a shattering experience when your answers betray you and you are left with new and disturbing questions. For Nishitani true questions were more essential than intelligent answers. He seemed confident about the answers he had found, and was not afraid of sharing his insight, but he never dictated anything. He preferred to challenge his partners to present their own answers, then joined them in a process of questioning and doubting, and finally left them when more essential questions began to dawn in their minds.

Nishitani's wisdom was mystagogic. Raising questions, he initiated his students and friends into deeper insight.

### *The flame of love*

In a discussion about Buddhist and Christian mysticism Nishitani was once asked about “the flame of love” described by Christian mystics as opposed to the apparently cool and crystal clear awareness of Buddhist enlightenment. Those who expected a criticism of all emotional attachment in piety were disappointed. He just commented that we cannot do without that “flame.”

Nishitani was a man of faith. The desperate search for meaning is not a

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groping at random in the dark. Our lives are sustained by a universal force which holds things together, a motive power which urges us to abandon ourselves to the abyss of nihilism, knowing that nihilism is transformed into a new world. He made it perfectly clear that he could never become a Christian, but whenever he referred to Christ he spoke in love, as a friend and disciple of the great Master.

As a philosopher he could not avoid philosophical categories and abstract language—sometimes it was difficult to grasp what he was trying to express. As a man of faith, however, he became most eloquent when he spoke the language of the soul: in poetry and symbolism, anecdotes and legends, mythology and parables. Even in his philosophical works one can hear the voice of the preacher who witnesses to the light he had seen, urging others to see.

It is puzzling that philosopher who is so critical of Christianity appealed so strongly to Christians. Apart from his personality and the power of his philosophical approach, I think one of the reasons for this attraction is that his criticism was nurtured by a flame of love—also for Christ and his Way. His critical questions were not raised from a standpoint outside faith, but emerged in a process of search into the foundations of faith.

I never heard Nishitani speak about his disciples. He probably had more than he was aware of. And many of them were Christians.

### Thinking of Life

Tsujimura Kōichi

As anyone who has visited Nishitani Sensei knows, neither in his seminar room at the university nor at his home was there anything like visiting days or visiting hours. Except on occasions when a guest was already present, one could visit Sensei at almost any time. The number of people from all walks of life who have been shown into the three-mat sitting room in his house is probably beyond calculation. Sensei's door was always open to everyone who came.

One time I asked him about this. He said, "The idea of having visiting hours seems too formal and academic. One must be free, like Suzuki Daisetz." Since sometime after the war, a piece of Daisetz's calligraphy inscribed with the words, *byōjōshin*, "ordinary mind," hung so as to face the visitor entering Sensei's house. For me, each and every time I crossed the