

The Middle Way of Emptiness in Modern Japanese Philosophy & the Zen Oxherding Pictures

STEVE ODIN

Introduction

In this essay I would like to accomplish two ends: first, to clarify the nature of the Middle Way of *sūnyatā* or emptiness in the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy; and second, to illustrate the Middle Way through the famous Ten Oxherding Pictures. The Kyoto school, through its initiatives in East-West comparative thought and Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue, has become famous for its prescription of emptiness or absolute nothingness as an antidote for the problem of “nihilism” which they see in contemporary Western thought and civilization. According to the Kyoto School philosophers, the problem of nihilism as defined especially by Nietzsche can be resolved only by converting from relative nothingness to absolute nothingness. Hence, it has now become commonplace to describe the central task of philosophy of religion as defined by the Kyoto School as that of “overcoming nihilism.” Yet in terms of its Buddhist philosophical orientation, the problem of the Kyoto School is actually to realize the Middle Way of *sūnyatā*, emptiness. More specifically, the *sūnyatā* tradition propounded by Nāgārjuna and ultimately tracing back to the Buddha himself is to be understood as a *via media* between the two major philosophical extremes of “nihilism” on the one side and “eternalism” on the other.

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In this context I would like to clarify the manner whereby the Kyoto School establishes a Middle Way of *śūnyatā* between these eternalistic and nihilistic positions by means of a threefold dialectical "emptying" process which moves from Being to relative Nothingness to absolute Nothingness. Moreover, it will be shown how the Kyoto School has appropriated the dynamics of Zen, Kegon and Tendai Buddhist dialectics into this threefold emptying process. And finally, I will endeavor to relate the Middle Way philosophy of *śūnyatā* as formulated by Kyoto School to the famous Ten Oxherding Pictures illustrating the progressive stages of Zen enlightenment. It is hoped that in this manner a new and deeper philosophical interpretation can be given to the Zen Oxherding series while at the same time using these pictorial representations to visualize the dialectical emptying process at the heart of the Kyoto School strategy for overcoming nihilism and realizing the Middle Way.

I

The Middle Way in Early Buddhism

As explained by David Kalupahana at the outset of his work entitled *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, the two aspects of the Buddha's teachings on the Middle Way, the philosophical and the practical, are clearly enunciated in two discourses, the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* and the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, both of which are highly esteemed by almost all the schools of Buddhism despite their sectarian rivalries. The *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* discusses the philosophical Middle Way, placed against the background of two absolutistic theories in Indian philosophy, namely, permanent existence (*atthitā*) propounded in the early Upanisads and nihilistic non-existence (*natthitā*) suggested by the Materialists. The middle position is described as "dependent arising" (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) whereby all compound events are said to arise through chains of causes and conditions.¹ The practical Middle Way is set forth in the famous *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, usually regarded as the first sermon delivered by the

¹ David Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 1.

Buddha. In this case the Middle Way is between the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism, or as it were, self-indulgence and self-mortification, and consists of the noble eightfold path leading to freedom and happiness. In both cases, the philosophical and the practical, the Middle Way is regarded as therapeutic, a medicine which cures one of suffering rooted in the illness of obsessive clinging to absolutistic extremes.

The Middle Way between these ontological extremes of existence and non-existence as well as their correlate errors of eternalism and nihilism was later reformulated and clarified by the great second century Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna. In the most celebrated verse of his *Treatise on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), Nāgārjuna writes:

The state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path. (MMK 24.18)²

In this justly famous verse, Nāgārjuna defines “emptiness” (Skt. *śūnyatā*) as whatever has come to be through “dependent arising” at the conventional level of existence, declaring this to be the true “middle path” or “middle way” (*madhyama*). In his work *The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy*, the renowned Japanese Buddhistologist Nagao Gadjin therefore clarifies the meaning of Nāgārjuna’s verse as follows: “The middle path is the identity of dependent co-arising with emptiness, the identity of emptiness with dependent co-arising. Because being and non-being are identical, the middle path cannot affirm either extreme.”³ By this view, *samsara*, the conventional world of being, is itself no different than *nirvana*, the world of non-being or emptiness, since both signify the process of dependent co-arising. On the one hand, dependent co-arising means that beings at the level of conventional existence are not independent and self-existent things, but only transient events brought about by causes and conditions. On the other hand, this emptying and negating of things does not mean that things do not exist at all since non-being

² Ibid, pp. 339–341.

³ Gadjin Nagao, *The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 13.

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is not nihilistic nothingness. Emptiness signifies only the absence of a fixed essence, the lack of substantial Being. According to Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the Middle Way based upon the principle of *śūnyatā*, all things having emerged by dependent co-arising are "empty" in the sense of being void of substantial own-being (*svabhāva*); yet by virtue of dependent co-arising they also come to attain a provisional or temporary existence as empty, nonsubstantial, and impermanent phenomena dependent upon chains of causation. Hence, being and non-being, conventional existence and emptiness, or samsara and nirvana, are the same in that both mean dependent co-arising. It is this which Nāgārjuna proclaims as the true Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism.

The Middle Way & T'ien-t'ai Buddhist Philosophy

In China the purport of Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*, chapter 24, verse 18, was crystallized by the famous "Three Truths" of Chih-i ((538–597) which became the foundation of T'ien-t'ai Buddhist philosophy. Chih-i codified Nāgārjuna's famous verse with his "Three Truths" doctrine of emptiness, conventional existence, and the middle. First, emptiness or absence of substantial Being. Second, conventional existence, the temporary or provisional existence of the phenomenal world as dependent arising. Third, the middle, a simultaneous affirmation of both emptiness and conventional existence as aspects of a single integrated reality. As explicated by Paul Swanson in his outstanding new work on Chih-i entitled *Foundations of T'ien-T'ai Philosophy*, according to Chih-i's reading of Nāgārjuna's verse the Middle Way designates a path between two extreme dogmatic positions; namely, the affirmation of substantial Being on the one side ("eternalism"), and the nihilistic denial of all existence on the other ("annihilationism"). The teaching of emptiness denies the extreme view of substantial Being as posited by eternalism, while the teaching of conventional designation denies the extreme view of nihilism.⁴

The practical side to the threefold truth of Chih-i is his concept of the threefold contemplation on emptiness, conventional existence, and

⁴ Paul L. Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-T'ai Philosophy* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), p. 5; also, see pp. 1–17.

the middle.⁵ The threefold contemplation based on the practice of *chih-kuan* or “cessation and insight” (Skt. *samatha-vipaśyanā*; Jp. *shikan*) is designed to cultivate three kinds of skillful cessation: cessation as true insight into the nature of phenomena as empty of substantial Being; cessation as insight into reality as conventional existence which arises through causes and conditions; and cessation as ending both extremes of discriminatory conceptual categories. Through the contemplation of emptiness, one advances beyond “naive realism,” wherein one accepts the substantial existence of objective reality, to realizing the emptiness of all things and the lack of any substantial Being or eternal essence. Through the contemplation of conventional existence, one realizes that the emptiness of all things does not mean mere nihilistic Nothingness, since they have a provisional or temporary reality as impermanent and nonsubstantial phenomena which originate by dependent co-arising. Through contemplation of the middle one finally realizes that both emptiness and conventional existence, if correctly understood, refer to the same thing, and that reality is simultaneously empty of substantial Being and conventionally existent.

Hence it may be said that the three contemplations represent a progressive dialectical emptying process in the path of a Bodhisattva which moves from Being to Nothingness to the Middle Way. Whereas the first contemplation empties phenomena of substantial own-being, thus denying the extreme view of eternalism, the second contemplation empties emptiness itself, thus denying the extreme view of annihilationism, finally resulting in the third contemplation on the Middle Way between substantial being and nihilistic Nothingness.

The Middle Way in Modern Japanese Philosophy

The “Kyoto School” of modern Japanese philosophy inspired primarily by the writings of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) has developed a system of East-West comparative thought and Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue focussing upon the concept of “emptiness” (*ku*)^a or “absolute Nothingness” (*zettaiteki mu*).^b From the side of Mahayana Buddhism the Kyoto School notion of emptiness has been deeply influenced by the dialectics of Zen (Ch. Ch’an), Kegon (Hua-yen)

⁵ Ibid, pp. 116–123.

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and Tendai (T'ien-t'ai) Buddhist philosophy against the general background of the *śūnyatā* tradition of Nāgārjuna. Hence the Kyoto School concept of emptiness or absolute Nothingness must ultimately be understood as a philosophy of the Middle Way based upon the fundamental principle of *śūnyatā*.

Throughout his penultimate essay on "The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview" (*Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*, 1945),⁶ Nishida elaborates a "logic of nothingness" (*mu no ronri*),⁷ comprehended as a logic of "absolutely contradictory self-identity" (*zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*).⁸ Again, he refers to it as "the *śūnyatā* logic of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* tradition."⁹ This contradictory structure of emptiness or Nothingness is further clarified by Nishida in terms of a paradoxical Zen logic of *soku hi*,¹⁰ "is and yet is not."¹¹ According to Nishida, the paradoxical structure of *soku hi* itself expresses the logical form operative in Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the Middle Way based on the principle of *śūnyatā*.

Nishida further argues that Nāgārjuna's "negative theology," which is formulated in terms of a logic of *śūnyatā*, exhibits a version of the structure of the dynamic interplay of affirmative and negative as articulated through the former's own paradoxical logic of *soku hi*.¹² For Nishida, God, the self and all things both "are" and "are not" in true emptiness so as to be simultaneously both present and absent, a self-identity of absolute contradictories, or as it were, a paradoxical equation of being and non-being in the locus of absolute Nothingness. In

⁶ Nishida Kitarō, *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview) from *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō), 19 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965; 2nd edition), vol. XI.

⁷ Nishida Kitarō, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, Translated with an Introduction by David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 89.

⁸ As Dilworth writes in his Translator's Introduction to Nishida's text:

"... the precedent for this translation of the logic of nothingness into the more precise logic of *soku hi* is traceable to the locus classicus of Mahayana Buddhist hermeneutics — Nagarjuna's correlation of 'emptiness' (*sunyata*) with 'dependent co-arising' (*pratityasamutpada*) . . . And Nishida himself alludes explicitly to Nagarjuna's Middle Path logic as a variant of the *soku hi* structure." Ibid, pp. 27-8.

⁹ Ibid, p. 71.

terms of the interreligious dialogue elaborated by Nishida in the same text, this paradoxical *soku hi* logic is exemplified by both the Christian *kenōsis* (self-emptying) and Buddhist *śūnyatā* (emptiness) traditions insofar as both conceive of an act of self-negation as intrinsic to the divine nature, so that Buddha and God both are and yet are not through contradictory self-identity. Hence, through his logic of *śūnyatā*, now crystalized in terms of a paradoxical logic of *soku hi* or is and yet is not, Nishida reclaims the Middle Way position of Nāgārjuna, the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts and the Ch'an/Zen teachings which argue for the reciprocity of being and nothingness, existence and non-existence, affirmation and negation, or presence and absence at the standpoint of emptiness. By this view, all things "are not" in the sense of lacking any substantial being ; yet this does not point to a nihilistic void since all things "are" at the conventional level of discourse in the sense of having a provisional or temporary existence through dependent co-arising. In this way, Nishida's *soku hi* logic of emptiness, whereby events are simultaneously both present yet absent, absent yet present, itself establishes a Middle Way between the "it is" of eternalism and the "it is not" of nihilism.

In his work *Shūkyō to wa nanika*, (What is Religion?), translated into English under the title *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani fully incorporates Nāgārjuna's logic of *śūnyatā* as appropriated through Nishida's *soku hi* logic in the context of framing his own philosophy of emptiness or absolute Nothingness.¹⁰ Indeed, it was under the general influence of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the Middle Way based on the notion of *śūnyatā* that Nishitani came to reformulate Nishida's fundamental notion of the "*basho* (locus, matrix, field) of absolute Nothingness" as the "standpoint of emptiness" (*kū no tachiba*).¹¹ Hence, in his Translator's Introduction to Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness* Jan Van Bragt states that "the Indian originator of the complete viewpoint of emptiness, Nāgārjuna, seems to be granted a position of central importance."¹¹ In this assertion he echoes the view of Hans Waldenfels as expressed in *Absolute Nothingness*, wherein the

¹⁰ Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated with an Introduction by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

¹¹ Ibid, p. xxvi.

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latter states: "We may safely assert that in his own way Nishitani is seeking the selfsame thing that Nāgārjuna had aimed at . . ."¹²

As scholars often point out, the major problematic raised by Nishitani in his work is the overcoming of modern nihilism. In general, Nishitani adopts Nishida's dialectic of negation, comprehended as an emptying process wherein "Being" (*u*)^a empties into "relative Nothingness" (*sōtaiteki mu*)^b which in turn empties into true "emptiness" (*kū*) or "absolute Nothingness" (*zettaitteki mu*). Nishitani's main contribution here is to employ this dialectical emptying or negation process toward the end of overcoming the problem of "nihilism" (*kyomu*)^c as described especially by Nietzsche and European existentialism. According to Nishitani, nihility or relative nothingness can only be overcome by converting to true emptiness or absolute nothingness, a standpoint which he sees as having been attained by both the Buddhist *sūnyatā* (emptiness) tradition in the East and the Christian *kenōsis* (self-emptying) tradition in the West.¹³ All substantial things in the realm of being which have been nullified and emptied into the abyss of nihility at the standpoint of relative nothingness are now affirmed just as they are in their positive suchness at the standpoint of *sūnyatā*, comprehended as the boundless openness of an absolute Nothingness wherein emptiness and fullness are the same. Hence, what Nishitani calls the "standpoint of emptiness" clearly functions to establish a Middle Way between the ontological extremes of substantial being and nihilistic nothingness.

Among the Kyoto School philosophers it is Abe Masao who most explicitly develops the Buddhist notion of emptiness as the Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism. In his book *Zen and Western Thought*, Abe comments on the Middle Way established by Nāgārjuna's logic of *sūnyatā* as follows:

Nāgārjuna rejected as illusory, not only the eternalist view,

¹² Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, tr. J.W. Heisig (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 15; also see 15-21.

¹³ See Steve Odin, "Kenōsis as a Foundation for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" in *The Eastern Buddhist* (Spring 1987); also see my articles "Abe Masao & the Kyoto School on Christian Kenōsis & Buddhist Sūnyatā" in *Japanese Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (January 1989), and "A Critique of the Kenōsis/Sūnyatā Motif in Nishida and the Kyoto School" in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, (1989).

which took phenomena to be real just as they are, but also the opposite nihilistic view that emptiness and non-being are the reality. He took as the standpoint of Mahayana Emptiness an independent stand liberated from every illusory point of view connected with either affirmation or negation, being or non-being, and called that standpoint the Middle Way. Therefore, for Nāgārjuna, Emptiness was not non-being but wondrous Being. Precisely because it is Emptiness which empties even emptiness, true Emptiness (absolute Nothingness) is absolute Reality which makes all phenomena, all existents, truly be.¹⁴

The theme of emptiness or absolute Nothingness as the Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism is resumed by Abe in the next chapter on "Non-Being and *Mu*—the Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and the West." He begins this remarkable essay by demonstrating the ontological priority of being over non-being in Christianity and Western substance philosophy, using Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* as a paradigm case.¹⁵ For Tillich, God is identified as Being itself, while non-being is understood as *privatio*, privation of Being. Abe then goes on to show that in the Middle Way of Zen Buddhism, tracing back to Nāgārjuna and ultimately to the Buddha himself, *śūnyatā* transcends both being (*u*) and non-being (*mu*), thereby avoiding both eternalism and nihilism at the ontological level of discourse. Whereas obsessive attachment to being results in the error of eternalism, clinging to non-being sinks into nihilism. However, Abe seeks to demonstrate that in the standpoint of dynamic *śūnyatā* being and non-being are entirely relative, complementary, and reciprocal, such that neither one has ontological primacy over the other in the locus of absolute Nothingness. In the Zen logic of emptiness, being empties into the nihilistic standpoint of non-being or relative nothingness, which is itself emptied into the standpoint of absolute Nothingness, i.e., the suchness of absolute fullness or wondrous being. Again, underscoring Nāgārjuna's Middle Way philosophy of *śūnyatā*, Abe writes:

¹⁴ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. W.R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 94. Also see my review article on Abe's book in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1989).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

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It is Nāgārjuna who established the idea of *Śūnyatā* or Emptiness . . . Nagarjuna not only rejected what came to be called the eternalist view, which proclaimed the reality of phenomena as the manifestation of one eternal and unchangeable substance, but additionally denounced its exact counterpart, the so-called nihilistic view, which insisted that true reality is empty and non-existent. He thus opened up a new vista liberated from every illusory point of view concerning affirmation, being or non-being, as the standpoint of Mahayana Emptiness, which he called the Middle Path.¹⁶

In this context Abe again articulates the paradoxical dialectics of double negation in the Zen logic of emptiness functioning to establish the Middle Way between being and non-being, affirmation and negation, eternalism and nihilism. He maintains that the aim of the logic of emptiness is to achieve a standpoint of absolute affirmation through double negation, or as it were, negation of negation. Whereas the standpoint of substantial being is negated by non-being or nihilistic nothingness, the standpoint of non-being is in turn negated at the standpoint of *śūnyatā* or emptiness. In Abe's words:

This dialectical structure of *Śūnyatā* may be logically explained as follows: since *Śūnyatā* is realized not only by negating the 'eternalist' view but also by negating the 'nihilistic' view, it is not based on a mere negation but on a negation of negation. This double negation is not a relative negation but an absolute negation. And an absolute negation is nothing but an absolute affirmation.¹⁷

In his essay "Zen is not a Philosophy but . . ." Abe provides a lucid example of the Middle Way of emptiness with its Buddhist dialectics of double negation, and in the process gives us not only a splendid introduction to the basic philosophy of Zen but also a primer to the logic of Nothingness formulated by Nishida Kitarō and the Kyoto School. Abe uses the famous discourse given by the Chinese Zen master Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin (J. Seigen Ishin) of the T'ang Dynasty to eluci-

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 126.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 127.

date the Zen philosophy of absolute Nothingness with its paradoxical dialectics of form and emptiness. The discourse reads as follows:

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, 'Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.'

After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, 'Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.'

But now, having attained the abode of final rest [that is, Awakening], I say, 'Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters.'¹⁸

By Abe's interpretation of this discourse, whereas stage one (mountains are mountains, waters are waters) represents the world of form, the level of affirmation, differentiation, and objectification, stage two (mountains are *not* mountains, waters are *not* waters) is the world of formless emptiness, the level of negation, nondifferentiation, and subjectification. However, stage three (mountains are *really* mountains, waters are *really* waters) is the world of Form = Emptiness and Emptiness = Form, which is the level of nonduality between subject and object, unity and multiplicity, one and many. In terms of Kegon (Ch. Hua-yen) Buddhist dialectics, stage one is the realm of particularity (*ji*), stage two is the realm of universality (*ri*), while stage three is the realm of harmonious interpenetration between particularity and universality (*riji muge*)¹ as well as between particularity and particularity (*jiji muge*).² In this manner, Abe clarifies the basic structure of the Zen Buddhist logic of Nothingness formulated by Nishida and the Kyoto School, whereby the world of "Being" (*u*) is emptied into "relative nothingness" (*sōtaiteki mu*), which is itself emptied into "absolute Nothingness" (*zettaiteki mu*). Following the existentialist orientation of Nishitani, he further emphasizes that stage two, the level of negation or relative nothingness, is itself the standpoint of "nihilism" as defined by Nietzsche, which can only be overcome by breaking through to the deeper standpoint of *śūnyatā*, emptiness, or as it were, absolute Nothingness. In Abe's own words:

In this second stage there is a negation of the first stage of

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

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understanding and we realize that there is no differentiation, no objectification, no affirmation, no duality of subject and object. Here it must be said that everything is empty . . . but to remain solely within the confines of this negative realization would be nihilistic . . . The negative view must be negated. Emptiness must empty itself. Thus we come to the third stage.¹⁹

According to Abe, in the third and final stage, wherein mountains are really mountains and waters are really waters, "Emptiness empties itself, becoming non-emptiness, that is true Fullness."²⁰ The Zen logic of emptiness thereby reaches the standpoint of great affirmation through a negation of negation. For the locus of absolute Nothingness is the boundless openness wherein emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness, so that all things are affirmed just as they are in their positive suchness.

The upshot of Abe's analysis is that while the first stage of "mountains and waters" represents the standpoint of eternalism or substantial being, the second stage of "*no* mountains and waters" represents the standpoint of annihilationism or nihilistic nothingness. The third stage of "*real* mountains and waters" represents the standpoint of emptiness which affirms the conventional world of being without falling into eternalism and negates the conventional world of being without falling into nihilism. Hence, the third stage is precisely the Middle Way of emptiness between eternalism and nihilism, achieved through an emptying process of dialectical negations which moves from Being to relative nothingness to absolute Nothingness.

II

The Middle Way & the Zen Oxherding Pictures

In Japanese Zen Buddhist culture there emerged a unique tradition referred to as *geidō*¹ — the "*tao* (or Way) of art," wherein aesthetic and spiritual values were fused to such a degree that art and religion

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

became identified. In this climate of Zen aestheticism, *sumie* inkwash painting came to be used in the service of religion so as to be regarded not only as a way to achieve enlightenment through the contemplation of beauty, but also as a kind of *upāya* (Jp. *hōben*) or “skillful means” for communicating Zen enlightenment to others. A specific category of Zen Buddhist painting is provided by the so-called *zenki-zu*, “Pictures of Zen Encounters or Zen Activities,” sometimes also called “Zen support-pictures.” The “parable pictures” form a sub-category of *zenki-zu*, and Japanese Zen masters were especially fond of using one particular parable as a means of introducing students to Zen: namely, the parable of the “Ox and its Herdsman.” When the Ashikaga Shōgun Yoshimitsu asked the influential Zen abbot Zekkai Chūshin (1336–1405) to explain the fundamental principles of Zen Buddhism to him, the abbot used this parable, which appears in many versions, both in painting and in literature, as a textbook for his lessons with the regent.²¹

Scholars point out that as early as the Southern Sung period (1127–1279), Ch’an/Zen monks developed and depicted the analogy between oxherding and degrees of enlightenment. This has become generally known as the “Ten Oxherding Pictures” (Chin.: *shihniu-t’u* : Jp. *jūgyū-zu*). In the middle of the twelfth century Kuo-an Shih-yuan (c. 1150), a master of the Lin-chi (Rinzai) school of Ch’an, wrote short poems and prose comments on the ten stages revealed in a series of ten pictures drawn in the form of circle or *ensō* diagrams. Yet in his preface he refers to another earlier Ch’an master who used a series of five pictures in which, to illustrate the developing stages of enlightenment, a black ox became progressively whiter and finally vanished altogether into a blank circle symbolizing the nondual experience of emptiness or voidness. Other early versions of this motif employed six, eight and ten pictures, also ending in a blank circle of void empty space. Kuo-an, however, pushed the teaching to a deeper level, ending not with the blank space of an empty circle, but with two more additional pictures showing the enlightened sage’s return to the world. This version, reproduced in Chinese books, was brought by Japanese monks to Japan, where it found widespread popularity during the 14th

²¹ Helmut Brinker, *Zen in the Art of Painting* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 103; also see pp. 103–110.

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and 15th centuries. It is generally agreed that the greatest version of the Zen Oxherding Pictures based on Kuo-an's prototype is a Japanese handscroll with ten *sumie* inkwash paintings owned by Shōkoku-ji temple and attributed to the renowned 15th century artist-monk Shūbun (active c. 1423–1460).²²

For purposes of analysis the structure of the Zen Oxherding series can be divided into three parts. (1) The first seven pictures represent the austere life of discipline in a Zen monastery as a novice searches for the Way, symbolized by a young student's search for an ox; (2) the eighth picture shows only an empty circle symbolizing the emptiness or voidness realized through *satori*, enlightenment; (3) and the last two pictures show the return to the ordinary world in the post-enlightenment stages. Whereas the ninth picture in the third stage depicts an artistic intuition of nature as an aesthetic continuum, the tenth picture culminates in the return to the marketplace of ordinary people, the moral level of social engagement where it is realized that emptiness and compassion are inseparable.

The Zen Oxherding series as divided into the above threefold structure functions as a lucid and profound illustration of the dialectical emptying process operating in the texts of both traditional and modern Japanese Buddhist philosophy based upon the teaching of the Middle Way and its underlying principle of *sūnyatā*. In terms of the traditional Zen Buddhist dialectic of Form and Emptiness, the first stage, represented by pictures one through seven, is the world of Form, while the second stage, represented by picture eight, is the world of formless Emptiness, leading finally to the third stage of the Middle Way, represented by pictures nine and ten, the world in which Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form as proclaimed by the *sūnyatā* tradition running through the thought of Nāgārjuna, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, the Ch'an/Zen teachings, and the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy. In terms of the dialectics of East Asian Keron (Ch. Hua-yen) Buddhism, the first stage (1–7) is the realm of par-

²² For a good reproduction of the "Zen Oxherding series" attributed to Shūbun, the great 15th century artist-monk of Shōkokuji Temple in Kyoto, accompanied by the Chinese Ch'an master Kuo-an's prose commentary on the allegory as well as the co-author's own historical remarks, see Sylvan Barnet and William Burto, *Zen Inkwash Paintings* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1982), pp. 82–5.

particulars (*ji*), the world of the many, and the second stage (8) is the realm of the universal (*ri*), the world of the one, the third stage (9–10) is the realm of harmonious interfusion between the particular and universal (*riji muge*), the Middle Way of mutual penetration between the many and the one. Moreover, in terms of Tendai (Ch. T'ien-t'ai) Buddhist dialectics, while the first stage (1–7) depicts the truth of conventional existence (*ketai*),^m and the second stage (8) depicts the truth of emptiness (*kūtai*),ⁿ the third stage (9–10) depicts the truth of the Middle Way (*chūtai*)^o between eternalism and nihilism.

With the Zen Oxherding series one can clearly visualize the three major stages constituting the “emptying” process described by Nishida, Nishitani and Abe of the Kyoto School. Indeed, to the extent that the Kyoto School has appropriated the dialectics of Tendai, Kegon and Zen Buddhism, the use of the Oxherding series to illustrate the emptying process in these traditions may also be applied to modern Japanese philosophy. However, in the case of the Kyoto School, the three major stages of the Oxherding series have been codified in a dialectical emptying process whereby “Being” (*u*) is emptied into “relative nothingness” (*sōtaiteki mu*) which is itself emptied into “absolute Nothingness” (*zettaitteki mu*). This threefold dialectical emptying or negation process operant in the Kyoto School logic of *śūnyatā* can be shown in its relation to the three major stages of the Zen Oxherding series as follows:

(1) The first seven pictures, stage one, depict the standpoint of substantial Being, the extreme position of eternalism, wherein a transcendent God, the separate ego and a multiplicity of phenomena in nature have all been reified or absolutized as having *svabhāva*, independent self-existence. In terms of the paradoxical *kōan* of Zen master Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin (Jp. Seigen Ishin) as interpreted by Abe Masao, this is the level of “ordinary mountains and waters.”

(2) The eighth picture, stage two, depicts the standpoint of relative nothingness, the position of annihilationism, wherein God, the ego-self and all things are emptied of substance or negated of own-being so as to dissolve into a nihilistic void. This is the level of “no mountains and waters.”

(3) The ninth and tenth pictures, stage three, depict the locus of absolute Nothingness, or as it were, the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, thus representing the Middle Way of emptiness between eternalism and nihilism. All the phenomena negated and emptied at the standpoint of

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nihilism or relative nothingness are now affirmed just as they are in true suchness at the standpoint of absolute nothingness, i.e., the locus of *śūnyatā* where emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness. This is the level of “*real* mountains and waters.”

In terms of the dialectic of double-negation characterizing the logic of *śūnyatā* elaborated by Nishida and the Kyoto School, the first stage in the Zen Oxherding series is the standpoint of affirmation. The second stage is the standpoint of negation. And the third stage represents the standpoint of complete affirmation achieved by a negation of negation. The Zen Oxherding series may be further elucidated through Nishida Kitarō's logic of *śūnyatā* as translated into his paradoxical logic of *soku hi*, “is and yet is not.” While the first seven pictures of stage one represent the level of presence, affirmation, or being, and the eighth picture of stage two represents the level of absence, negation, or non-being, the ninth and tenth pictures of stage three signify the level of contradictory self-identity between presence and absence, affirmation and negation, or being and non-being, thereby constituting a *via media* between eternalism and nihilism at the ontological level of discourse. Hence, in the third stage of the Ten Oxherding Pictures as comprehended through Nishida's Zen-styled logic of *soku hi*, God, the ego and all things are paradoxically both present yet absent, absent yet present, both there and somehow not there at all in the standpoint of *śūnyatā*. That is to say, at the standpoint of *śūnyatā* things “are not” in that they are devoid of any substantial Being or permanent essence; yet this does not mean nihilistic nothingness since these things still “are” in the sense of possessing a conventional existence as provisional or temporary events arising through a multitude of causes and conditions. Nishida's Middle Way logic of *soku hi* is therefore illustrated very clearly in the Zen Oxherding series, according to which stage one (1–7) shows how things “are” at the standpoint of being and stage two (8) shows how things “are not” at the standpoint of relative nothingness, while stage three (9–10) reveals how things paradoxically both “are” and “are not” at the ultimate standpoint of absolute nothingness.

The threefold structure of the Zen Oxherding series as described above can be further understood in terms of the three stages of achieving enlightened “selfhood” or “personhood” through the Middle Way of Buddhist emptiness. In the Zen Buddhist teaching of the

Middle Way, the problem is how to affirm the self without falling into eternalism and how to negate the self without falling into nihilism. According to the Kyoto School philosophy of *śūnyatā*, the dialectical emptying process which moves from Being to relative nothingness to absolute Nothingness represents the stages on the way to enlightened selfhood: namely, the movement from ego to the non-ego to the true Person. For Nishida, Nishitani, Abe, and other Kyoto School thinkers, whereas the "ego-self" reified at the standpoint of being is emptied of content with the realization of "non-ego" (Jp. *muga*; Skt. *anātman*), at the standpoint of nihility or relative nothingness, creative and spontaneous "personality" is itself realized in the ultimate standpoint of emptiness or absolute nothingness. Hence, it might be said that while the seven pictures in stage one of the Zen Oxherding series depict a level wherein the ego has been reified as having independent self-existence or substantial own-being, the eighth picture, stage two, depicts the level wherein the ego has been wholly nullified and emptied into a nihilistic void, this being followed by the ninth and tenth pictures, stage three, in which authentic personhood is achieved.

The dynamics of this movement from ego to non-ego to personhood as depicted by the Zen Oxherding series can be elucidated with more precision in terms of the ethical philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō based on his fundamental concept of personhood as *ningen*.²¹ In his work *Ningen no gaku toshite no rinrigaku* (Ethics as Anthropology),²² Watsuji called his "ethics" (*rinrigaku*) the science of the Person, based upon the Japanese concept of human nature as *ningen*, whose two kanji characters express the double structure of selfhood as being both "individual" and "social." Accordingly, the Person as *ningen* does not mean simply the individual (*hito*), but the "betweenness" in which people are located. In such a manner, he argues, the word *ningen* points the way for an ethical philosophy based on the key idea of "betweenness (or relatedness) of individuals" (*hito to hito no aidagara*). From the standpoint of Watsuji's understanding of personhood, the first seven pictures of the Zen Oxherding series can be thought of as representing the stage of an individual ego-self, while the eighth picture

²¹ Watsuji Tetsurō, *Ningen no gaku toshite no rinrigaku* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1936).

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signifies the blank empty space of no-self or non-ego, leading finally to the third stage culminating in the celebrated tenth Oxherding picture, returning to the market place with open hands. This last picture of the series is the level of real personhood signified by the word *ningen* constituted by an individual in relation to a social community. Hence, the true Person as understood by the Middle Way of emptiness is neither an immortal soul as posited by eternalism nor a mere nothingness as posited by nihilism but a field of relationships grounded in the surrounding environment of society and nature as a self-in-context.

Conclusion

In this essay I have endeavored to clarify how the series of aesthetic images constituting the Zen Oxherding Pictures function to disclose the Middle Way of emptiness between eternalism and nihilism at the ontological level of discourse. More specifically, I have examined how the Zen Oxherding series might be seen as symbolically depicting the three stages of emptying articulated by modern Japanese philosophy in relation to Zen, Tendai and Kegon dialectics as understood against the general background of the *śūnyatā* tradition of Nāgārjuna.

From the standpoint of the existentialist orientation of modern Japanese philosophy as developed by the Kyoto School, the most significant feature of the Zen Oxherding series is that it does not end with merely an empty circle depicting the nihilistic void of relative nothingness. Rather, it concludes with the standpoint of absolute nothingness, or as it were, a fully positive emptiness which affirms all things in their suchness. Just as the eighth picture (stage two), a blank circle symbolizing nihilistic voidness, functions to empty the world of substantial Being represented by pictures one through seven (stage one), so the last two pictures (stage three) function to empty out emptiness itself, signifying the awakened sage's return to samsara from nirvana. It is in such a way that the Zen Oxherding series can be understood from the standpoint of modern Japanese philosophy as the pictorial representation of a dialectical emptying process which moves from Being to relative nothingness to absolute Nothingness, thereby coming to realize the standpoint of dynamic *śūnyatā* as the Middle Way of emptiness between eternalism and nihilism. And at the same time, the dialectic of emptying developed by the Kyoto School philosophers can

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itself be imaginatively visualized by means of these aesthetic images of nothingness constituting the Zen Oxherding Pictures.

GLOSSARY

a	空
b	絶対的無
c	無の論理
d	絶対矛盾的自己同一
e	即非
f	空の立場
g	有
h	相対的無
i	虚無
j	理事無礙
k	事事無礙
l	芸道
m	假諦
n	空諦
o	中諦
p	人間