

## VIEWS AND REVIEWS

### The Nothingness Beyond God

ROBERT E. CARTER

I think that we can distinguish the West to have considered being as the ground of reality, the East to have taken nothingness as its ground. I will call them reality as form and reality as the formless, respectively.

NISHIDA KITARŌ<sup>1</sup>

Person is constituted at one with absolute nothingness as that in which absolute nothingness becomes manifest. It is actualized as a "Form of Non-Form."

NISHITANI KEIJI<sup>2</sup>

ONE OF THE most central images in modern Japanese Zen philosophy, in particular that of the Kyoto School, is that of *the form of the formless*. It is also one of the most difficult notions to comprehend. Within it, however, are the seeds of understanding and comparative contrast which may help those of us brought up in the West to make sense of, and even to learn from the Eastern emphasis on the epistemological and metaphysical priority of Nothingness over Being.

The fundamental question is, of course, what does Nothingness add to human understanding? For if it has no clear referent, then we may be able to cut it off with Occam's razor, much as science has eliminated

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<sup>1</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970), p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 71.

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ungrounded additions such as phlogiston and animating spirits in the blood. Indeed, in general it is assumed in the West that *being* is the primary category of understanding, and that "nothingness" is simply a term which refers to the negating, denial or removal of being. There is being and there is non-being. Non-being isn't anything that has an existence of its own, but is a dependent notion referring to the no-longer-being-ness of a thing, situation or property of a being. Thus, being precedes non-being, both in ontological validity and in epistemic significance. Non-being is dependent on whatever being it negates, as is evidenced by the awkwardness of trying to have it the other way around, i.e., to refer to being as non-nothingness.

While it is an academic question to this point who is right, the going gets much more difficult when the issue is raised in a specifically *religious* context. While few would volunteer for active service in the fight of Being over Nothingness in epistemic priority, the issue is different when "God" is substituted for "Being." Paul Tillich comes to mind as the modern Protestant Christian advocate of such a substitution, for he tells us that God is Being itself, or the ground of Being.<sup>3</sup> Tillich is careful to point out that "God," or "Being," or the "ground of Being" are all terms which, for religious purposes, are used symbolically, i.e., they refer to God as knowable and partially revealed by the world of the finite which is his creation, and in which we share, and yet they also refer to God's transcendence, to his being wholly other and beyond all finite understanding.<sup>4</sup> To take the term "God" literally is to miss its major purpose, to point us away from the finite. Religious language is always "self-transcendent,"<sup>5</sup> and so Tillich must call attention to the "God above the God of theism."<sup>6</sup> To hold any conception of God is, by necessity, to focus on the finite, and to let go of the "ecstatically transcendent" which is religious language's main focus.<sup>7</sup> But to emphasize the transcendent at the expense of the finite and conceptualizable is to fall into conceptual emptiness, or linguistic mean-

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, Existence and the Christ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 7-10.

inglessness. Thus Tillich cannot emphasize the unknowability of God as primary, but only as a procedure for calling attention to the limitedness of the finite, concrete images which must remain in the forefront of meaning. In a way, one could say that our ideas of God are the forms of the formless, and that while the formless can never be captured by finite forms, it can be pointed to.

For the Japanese Zen philosophers, however, there are problems with such a view. Abe Masao observes that it is odd to speak of the ground of Being as itself Being, and as embracive of non-Being. While it is now a commonplace to follow Heidegger in speaking of that nothingness which lurks at the heart of Being, the logic of the claim, as Tillich interpreted it, is that Being, or God, embraces both non-Being and itself. Abe asks how Being can be its own ground.<sup>8</sup> He suggests that what is able to embrace both Being and non-Being must itself be neither of these or, at least, both of these, although such recognition would be but a stage along the path to non-dualism. This is, in fact, the form of the formless: because it is neither Being nor non-Being, both can arise out of it. The dualism of Being and non-Being is the form, and both require the "ground" which is neither, and therefore can give birth to both. Nothingness, or the formless, is non-dualistic because it is *prior* to any dualism. Nothingness is the non-dualistic whole which is as it is, and before it is sliced up by the dualistic logic of Being and non-Being. It is not simply the negation of Being, but includes both Being and non-Being. It is not simply the negation of Being, but includes both being and its negation. It is not *any thing*, but is beyond all predication, or any sort of description, since all description is already to be on this side of dualism.

What is one to do with all of this? By denying the adequacy of the dualistic perspective—creation/creator, self/other, subjective/objective, matter/mind—have we not skewed Tillich's formula such that the transcendent meaning of Ultimate Reality has collapsed into vacuousness and meaninglessness? The answer would be an unqualified "yes" if the only approach to the matter was verbal and intellectual. But the East has long viewed language and reason as but inadequate tools for the partial revelation of that which is neither verbal nor in-

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<sup>8</sup> Abe Masao, "Non-being and *Mu*: The Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and the West," *Religious Studies* II (June 1975), p. 181.

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tellektual, but *experiential*. More precisely still, the nature of the experiences here identified is usually described as being like "feeling." To come face to face with the formless, then, is to cultivate feeling in direct experience. As Nishida Kitarō expressed it:

It is a common idea that feeling differs from knowledge, and that its content is less clear. . . . The alleged unclarity of feeling means nothing more than that it cannot be expressed in conceptual knowledge. It is not that consciousness in feeling is unclear, but rather that feeling is a more subtle and delicate form of consciousness than conceptual knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

For Nishida, feeling is what is left when we imaginatively *remove* all content from consciousness, for when we do so we are left with "personal unity, the content of which is precisely that of feeling."<sup>10</sup> It is revealed when the self is merged with its activity, and all qualities disappear in one undifferentiated awareness.<sup>11</sup> What is aware is aware, and that is all there is. It is perfectly lucid and clear, for it is everything, without being a distinguishable anything. It is not an awareness of something, nor is it someone's being aware. There is just *awareness*. And the East teaches that the most efficient way of reaching such feeling is through the paths of *meditation*. The methods of the koan, of the chanting of sutras, of silence and stillness are all meant to lead one to the depths of self where all subject/object distinctions vanish into the lucidity of *pure* experience. Thus it is that the Buddha is your own mind, and your mind gives way to your self as the place or focus of all things/experiences. Your self, as pure experience, is an undifferentiated place (Nishida's *basho*) or arena where all things arise, except that it is not a place or arena, but an aperture or opening. It, too, is characterized as impermanent. To try to characterize it as anything more than an aperture or dynamic place is to lose it. Like the eye which sees all things but cannot see itself, the self experiences all things but does not experience itself except as experiencing. It is nothing. And because it has no characteristics of its own, it is able to experience an in-

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<sup>9</sup> Nishida Kitarō, "Affective Feeling," *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. VII, ed. Nitta and Tatematsu (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1978), p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Nishida, "Affective Feeling," p. 225.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

definite number of forms as characteristics. Yet, in doing so, it reveals its own form: it is formless. And the only route to an understanding of this formlessness is by the direct experience of its grasping of the myriad of forms. The awareness of forms reveals beneath these forms the formless which makes the awareness of forms possible, in the same way analogously that the seeing of things presuppose an unseen seer, viz., the eye. The self is the unknown knower, the unconscious or non-conscious consciousness, the unexperienced experiencer which is grasped in the very acts of experiencing. The Neo-Vedantist K. C. Bhattacharya has referred to the self which cannot be objectified as "absolute freedom," in that any attempt to catch it as a content is already to lose it.<sup>12</sup> The self can never become a subject of consciousness, i.e., an object, but is forever an uncatchable subjectivity which, nevertheless is ever revealed in the many *acts* of consciousness. The self is freedom without form, without characteristics, but which is nevertheless glimpsed as an awareness, as a feeling, that is, as a unity of discrete acts of awareness, or as awareness itself. It is not a thing which has freedom, but is *freedom* itself. It is self revealing.

The path to an understanding of Nothingness, then, is the nothingness of pure experience, i.e., the self as pure awareness. Is this nothingness of self the same as the Nothingness beyond God, or Absolute Nothingness? The answer is not only complex but varied, depending on the tradition that one adheres to, as the extremes in Buddhism, from Pure Land to Zen, make amply evident. Still, Abe may be taken to speak for Buddhists as a whole in trying to distinguish Nothingness from the Christian conception of God: "If Ultimate Reality, while being taken as Nothingness or Emptiness, should be called 'Him' or 'Thou', it is, from the Zen point of view, no longer ultimate."<sup>13</sup> In any case, within the Zen tradition, Abe states unambiguously that "True Emptiness is never an object found outside of oneself. It is what is real-

<sup>12</sup> K. C. Bhattacharya, *The Subject as Freedom* (Bombay: The Indian Institute of Philosophy, 1930), pp. 205-206. Reprinted in George Bosworth Burch, ed., "Search for the Absolute" in *Neo-Vedanta* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), p. 171. The same phrase, "absolute freedom," is used by Nishitani Keiji in his "The Standpoint of Sunyata," *The Eastern Buddhist* VI, 2 (October 1973); see also Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Abe Masao, "God, Emptiness and the True Self," *The Eastern Buddhist* II, 2 (October 1969), p. 23.

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ly *unobjectifiable*. Precisely for this reason, it is the ground of true objectivity."<sup>14</sup> Some Buddhists will speak of Buddha, or even of God, in seemingly Christian terms. Nevertheless, the self-corrective background of Buddhism forces one to use such words symbolically, and thereby analogically. A creed, an image, a sacred work, even the actual Buddha himself are but pointers, "hundred-foot poles" to be used as finite springboards to the heights of Nothingness itself. Thus, as D. T. Suzuki remarks, "What we must grasp is that in which God and man have not yet assumed their places."<sup>15</sup> This "undivided something" out of which even God arises is the Nothingness beyond God, which is the ground of God, Being, and non-Being. It is the ultimate ground of everything.

The ordinary categories of Western Theological assertion now begin to break down. Nothingness, unlike God, is not just transcendent. It is immanent and transcendent. More precisely still, Nothingness, unlike the Judeo-Christian God, is neither transcendent nor immanent in the Western sense of these terms. At the least, Nothingness is *both* transcendent *and* immanent, and at most *neither*, because it is beyond (or different from) these categories. If one must choose one of these terms as best capturing Nothingness, however, then "immanent" must get the nod. Nothingness is found underfoot, as it were, as the ground of everything in the everyday world. Nirvana is Samsara, Samsara is Nirvana: indeed, Nothingness, using Kantian language, is the condition of the possibility of everything. But not only is it the condition of the possibility of *everything*, it is only knowable in the phenomenal world of experience *as every thing*. Each and every *thing* is an expression of (a manifestation of, a self-determination of) Nothingness itself. The phenomenally real is not a creation separate from the creator, nor is it simply made in the image of the absolute. Rather, it is the Absolute, expressed as the Absolute expresses itself phenomenally. Everything "is" the forms of the undivided, the formless. Transcendence is other and alien, but Nothingness is given at the base of one's own everyday experiences. To borrow a schema from Kant, the regulative ideas of *Freedom*, *God*, and *Immortality* are trans-

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<sup>14</sup> Abe, "God, Emptiness and the True Self," p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> D. T. Suzuki and Ueda Shizuteru, "The Sayings of Rinzaï," *The Eastern Buddhist* VI, 1 (May 1973), p. 93.

formed when applied to Nothingness. 1) Kantian Freedom gives way to what Nishida calls "Affective Feeling,"<sup>16</sup> i.e., the self which is ever free because it is unobjectifiable, undeterminable, without characteristics or distinctions, but which is at the ground of all determinations. The self as directly given in feeling is absolutely free and is the ground of even such categories as causality itself. 2) For Nishida, the notion of God no longer refers to a Being-as-substance, and therefore as objective, nor as a symbolic concept with the characteristics of finiteness and infinity, of immanence and transcendence, but God is, in the form of Nothingness, the pure experience of the formless and undifferentiated *whole* from which, or on which, the ripples and waves of the temporary and differentiated are registered. Nothingness is revealed in experience, but only when one is able to look through the forms at the formless of which the forms are expressions. To view a Zen garden of sand, and to see the mounds and ripples as thing-in-themselves, rather than as temporary forms of the underlying oneness of sand, is to miss the point. The finite world can become transparent in the same way as the self can. In either case, one must learn to look through the specific acts of consciousness or substantial shapes, to the undifferentiated awareness or ground on which such differentiations float. Kantian Freedom and the Kantian God have given way to an immanence which transcends differentiation, as the inside "transcends" the outside of a thing. 3) The outward must now be recognized as the self-expression of the inward. Kantian Immortality gives way to the ever-recurring and eternal *Now*. Everything that occurs in time is also outside of time. Insofar as time is a form of the timeless, a differentiation of that out of which time as a specific awareness or focus, Nishitani Keiji writes, "The self is in every instant of time, [wholly] outside of time. In that sense . . . everyone's self is originally anterior to world and things."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nishida, "Affective Feeling," p. 225: "Now, I have argued above that feeling remains after all content of consciousness has been intellectually objectified. From the intellectual standpoint, it might be considered to be without content and indeterminate."

<sup>17</sup> Nishitani, "The Standpoint of Sunyata," p. 78; quoted in Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 111. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 159: "The self is, at every moment of time, ecstatically outside of time. It was in this sense that we spoke above of the self of each man as at bottom preceding world and things."

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According to the Buddhist theory of "interdependent origination,"<sup>18</sup> we know that all is intertwined causally, such that every event and every moment is inextricably interconnected with every other thing and every other moment. Thus, a moment drags with it all other moments, both past and future, and, therefore, all time enters into each and every moment. All pure experience is then, quite literally, eternity. On the other hand, each distinct jewel of time as a fresh and unique moment is as it is in its *suchness*, and thereby may be seen as a fresh form of the formless. Every moment is a fresh and sacred revelation of the absolute, because it is a self-expression of the absolute. All Being and all non-Being is a self-unfolding of Nothingness. Whereas the Christian God creates the world, and through a special or particular revelation makes evident his wishes for men, Nothingness does not create the world as form, but *is* the world of forms, for forms are the self-expressions of, and thereby the self-revelations of, the formless. Furthermore, no special revelation or moment is privileged, for "every single moment of infinite time has the solemn gravity that these privileged moments possess in Christianity."<sup>19</sup> The secular has taken on the fabric of the sacred, and in the image of Nishida, like the deep and precious pure silk lining of a Japanese kimono, is the unseen and rarely glimpsed which gives shape and ultimate meaning to the whole.<sup>20</sup> It is the connoisseur alone who realizes the importance of the lining, while at the same time recognizing that the value of the lining is best revealed by paying attention to the shape and color of the outer form of the kimono. Rich linings are best evidenced by attending to the shape and texture of the outer cloth. As Abe remarks, "Ultimate Reality is not something far away, over there. It is right here, right now. *Everything*

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<sup>18</sup> Dependent origination has several meanings within the various Buddhist traditions, including 1) the interconnection of the karmic forces according to causal laws giving formation to a life, 2) the manifestation of all phenomena out of a fundamental consciousness, and 3) the interpenetration of all things in the universe throughout the past, present and future in that nothing can exist separately from other things.

<sup>19</sup> Nishitani, "The Standpoint of Sunyata," as quoted in Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness*, p. 14; see Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 272.

<sup>20</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Free Publishers, 1958), p. 130. The kimono image is amplified by Schinzinger on p. 32.

*starts from the here-and-now.* Otherwise everything loses its reality."<sup>21</sup> You, me, rocks, and the seeming emptiness of outer space itself are all forms of the formless, and as such, they are particular revelations of that which is prior to both the finite and the infinite, the secular and the Divine. Any attempt to define it in words will fail, but one can catch it in the marrow of direct experience, of pure experience. It is the place, itself without characteristics, out of which all things with characteristics arise. Nothingness is God's face, your face, and my face before any of us were born, that is, before we were individuated.

A final comment is, perhaps, in order here. It may appear to some that the final thrust of the analysis of Nothingness is to make philosophy into *poetry*. To talk of genuine "kinship" amongst men and rocks, trees and rivers is to blush philosophically because of the richness of literary metaphor. Yet Nothingness demands nothing less. If we are all self-manifestations of the whole, then each of us is sacred, Divine, godly. The very act of losing our ego and finding the self is the clearing of a place—again, Nishida's *basho*—where the suchness of everything as it is, luxurious in its lining, may appear. Indeed, it is one's own Nothingness of place which is "a field of love of fellow man," and even more strikingly, "a field of love toward all living things and even toward all things."<sup>22</sup> It is an authentic capacity which has arisen, and it is no metaphor that it is termed the "Great Compassion." Compassion is the capacity to empathize, to treat the other not as one would oneself, and not merely as he, she or it may view himself, herself, or itself. To truly empathize is to enter into the deep self of the other, the Buddha-nature of the other, such that he, she or it arises as a *self* within one's own place of appearance. Nishitani calls this "circuminsessional interpenetration,"<sup>23</sup> and Robert S. Hartman writes of "compenetration."<sup>24</sup> Whatever one calls it, note well that in losing my ego I have cleared a place where all things may appear in their suchness, my *self* included. The Nothingness as clearing makes evident that all that appears is lined with precious infinity, and clothed in the

<sup>21</sup> Abe, "God, Emptiness and the True Self," p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, pp. 279-280.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>24</sup> Robert S. Hartman, "The Logic of Value," *Review of Metaphysics* XIV (March 1961), p. 408, and "The Logic of Value," *MSS*, p. 32.

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self-expressive garments of the self-revelation of impermanence, of Buddha, of the nothingness which embraces and yet is beyond God. All is One, and the great kinship of the universe is revealed. Ethically, one acts in love, compassionately, not because one must, but because now one is unable to act in any other way. Just as a healthy ego serves as the standard of the Golden Rule—do to others as you would do or have done to yourself—it is the non-ego of the deep self of Nothingness that allows all things to present themselves in their suchness. The non-duality of self and others is realized, and the so-called parts now act as a single whole. Love is now spontaneous, an outpouring from the depths of the self where it is understood not that I am my brother's keeper, but that my brother and I are cut from the same cloth. We share, with everything else, an identical parentage. The love which is, ideally, expressed within a family is now the standard of Ethics. Poetry has become a way of living, of acting, of viewing all things in the cosmos, and even a preparation for the final impermanence—death itself. If attitudinal changes are the proof of the vitality and reality of religion, then the religion of Nothingness must be classed as amongst the most powerful and noble of transformative paths. Once the *enlightenment* of Nothingness is grasped, one will never see oneself, others, the world, or God the same way again.

I said at the beginning of this essay that it was not my point to say who is right, the advocates of Being who are the dominant thinkers of the West, or the advocates of Nothingness who are the dominant thinkers of the East. Not only would trying to decide the issue be a gesture unworthy of serious academic inquiry, but it would also miss the point of what has been described. East and West have very different contributions to make to human understanding, and there is nothing in what I have said to suggest that the two approaches are not complementary. One can either look at religious questions from the perspective of dualism, or one can seek to find a perspective prior to the dualistic split. One can find salvation both within or beyond this world, through either of the approaches. What I have tried to say is simply that it is far easier to dismiss the more abstract and unexpected ultimate principle of the East as mere vacuous assertion, a legacy of unethical times past, than it is to dismiss the Western theorizings about God, Being, and Being's Ground. I suspect, however, that Nishida is closer to the truth and to the point of this essay, when he writes:

## CARTER

Reality is both being and non-being; it is being-*qua*-non-being and non-being-*qua*-being. It is both subjective and objective, both *noema* and *noesis*. Subjectivity and objectivity are absolutely opposed, but reality is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, i.e., the self-identity of this absolute opposition.<sup>25</sup>

It would, of course, be too much to hope that the Yang of the West and the Yin of the East could simply be viewed as two perfect halves of an ultimate whole. There is too much to be considered in the many traditions that will not fit, and likely will not blend without force or compromise. Nevertheless, it would be an even greater mistake to suppose that the highest religious and philosophical achievements of East and West are necessarily in opposition, making the clashes to come inevitable. Instead, it would be wiser to struggle to see whether, as Nishida suggests, the greatest insights about the most important matters come from a joining of perspectives, Eastern and Western, in an attempt to glimpse whatever can be glimpsed of the infinite and inexpressible. Being and Nothingness may *together* add up to a total which yields a more complete, though still only a partial, understanding of the "shadow of the Eternal."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nishida, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, p. 246.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.