# *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*

## Prolegomena to an Understanding of Zen Experience and Nishida's "Logic of Place"

ROBERT E. CARTER

FROM THE EARLY BEGINNINGS of Greek philosophy to the present, two assumptions have remained constant and central in Western theorizing. The first is that behind or beneath the manifoldness, and even chaos of sense experience there is a lawful and stable reality-substance, or being, variously interpreted as atoms, or water, or air, or an indefinite stuff. The many must be explained by a material-like oneness. The second is that this stable reality is correctly graspable only by reason itself, even though it is *contacted* by and through the sense organs. Philosophy, thus, is a purely cognitive activity, and reason is the sole and self-justifying means to knowledge. Experience of any kind, whether inner or outer, merely serves as a provider of information, often unreliable, which must be vetted by reason, sometimes re-structured by thought, with the transformed result called "facts." But were one to "still" the mind, and let "pure experience" come to consciousness by itself and as it is, what would such awareness yield?

Izutsu Toshihiko, in his excellent and incisive book *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* (Tehran, 1977), writes in the preface that Zen is antiphilosophical "in the ordinary sense of the word, for 'philosophy' implies rational, discursive thinking and conceptualization" (p. x). Not only is reason not the sole means to and criterion of knowledge, it is a positive hindrance. Furthermore, as is now commonly understood in the West, ultimate reality is not Being, but Nothingness: not stable substance, but dynamic unfolding or determination of that which is behind categories and concepts, language and ordinary logic. Izutsu deals well with these two issues—Zen *reality* and Zen *knowing*—in a thorough and helpful way.

The basic "given," or "stuff," of Zen Buddhism is experience. Zen experience is "extraordinary experience which defies thinking and linguistic description" (p. x). Because of this extraordinariness, concepts and language are destined to

miss the mark—leaving *silence* as the main indicator of just what Zen experience is. Yet even silence is one-sided. If the ultimate reality at which Zen aims is pre-linguistic, and pre the bifurcation of experience into objects and subject, then it is, at the same time, *both* that which is absolutely undifferentiated *and* "the *Urgrund* of all existential forms" (p. 127). It is both the formless and the formed. But the formed, i.e., the myriad things in the world, are without fixed essences, and are not substantial in their Aristotelian fixity. In fact, "there are absolutely no fixed essences behind the ever-changing forms of phenomena" (p. 106), revealing an "ontological fluidity reigning over all things" (p. 128). Nevertheless, behind each and every thing can be seen the non-articulated itself, the formless and therefore undifferentiated Nothingness. Silence may point to this undifferentiated, but it cannot lead us to the myriad things which emerge out of Nothingness. Similarly, words may point towards the articulated differences amongst things, but this very articulatedness leaves un-caught and unseen the unarticulated Oneness which is their ultimate source. In fact, to try to trap the undifferentiated through language—i.e., differentiation—is not only to miss the mark, it is to distort the mark out of all recognition, for the one thing that Nothingness is not, is differentiated. Thus, the "Non-Articulated is capable of being articulated in infinitely differentiated ways" (p. 140), while at the same time, all of these ways are non-differentiated and uniformly One. Just as a garden of fine white pebbles is uniformly coloured and textured, at the same time its cones and waves of pebbles are differentiations within and of the undifferentiated. It is correct to notice *both* figure and ground, individual and field. Most of us have lost our sense of ground, and with it the sense of the fluidity of differentiated things. Instead, we see only differentiated things, and their thingness is so central to our perception that they, as objects, and we, as subjects, are the only reality—indeed, the highest and final reality. We fail to see that "Every single thing, while being a limited, particular thing, can be and *is* any of the rest of the things: indeed it is all other things" (p. 128). In short, the One can be seen in any particular thing, and any particular thing is an articulation of the One. And, as the One, or better, the Unarticulated, is beyond all conceptualization or differentiation, individual "things" must be seen in their undetermination, with a "no-mind" (p. 14). Then, and only then, will a "particular thing" reveal itself to us in its original reality. This is Prajñā wisdom, or non-discriminating consciousness.

Izutsu is quite correct in remarking that the Field (or Ground) is not something *metaphysical* lying behind the things which make up the phenomenal world. Instead, the Field, or Ground, or Nothingness *permeates* all things (p. 49). "Oriental Nothingness," he continues, manifests itself as awareness without

either awareness *of* something, or *by* something. There is just Awareness. And even though an individual is not aware of his personhood or subjectivity in this awareness of Nothing by Nothing, he remains the "*place*" where this Awareness happens. While Nishida Kitarō is not discussed by Izutsu, surely this analysis of man as the place where Nothingness arises to Consciousness (not the personal consciousness of a subject) is an admirable interpretation of Nishida's "Logic of Place." Indeed, Izutsu's account of Awareness is a helpful interpretation of Nishida's "pure experience" in *A Study of Good*. In fact, Izutsu here writes of a fourfold typology of awareness of the Field: 1. as Field alone, 2. as all-encompassing I (not of an individual ego, but as a total cosmic Ego), 3. as an Object (not as a single thing, but of a cosmic Object as the totality of the All), and 4. as a Field which now contains both Subject and Object again, but now with unusual freshness, transparency and depth, (pp. 50 f). It is actually Lin-chi and not Nishida who is discussed in this section. However, the relevance for Nishida Philosophy of the analysis of man as the potential master of the place where the Field, "saturated with energy" and "constituted by two major sources of force, the Subject and the Object," is striking.

Each of the four awarenesses requires a forgetting, or leaving behind of one's own I, or ego. Even the second "I" is transcendental, and requires the dissolution of the individual ego. Only when the ego is removed can one *become* whatever it is that one beholds. In an amusing passage, Izutsu relates an incident involving a famous authority on mysticism, who, upon hearing Izutsu remark that a Zen painter should become that which he sets about to paint, responded that "it was utterly impossible for a man to *become* a bamboo" (p. 79). Izutsu's answer is that one must not view the bamboo, from outside, as an object perceived by a subject, but as pure awareness, with ego disappearing into awareness of the bamboo as bamboo, and then of bamboo not as bamboo, but simply as awareness. Such awareness is not of the ego *becoming* bamboo, or of the bamboo as object being apprehended from inside, but simply Awareness, which, in this instance is bambooness, or being bamboo. The bamboo is the occasion of awareness, and the individual the place where awareness of bamboo can yield Awareness. Awareness itself is the Place where an individual's awareness of a particular bamboo tree reveals Nothingness as the Place of Awareness of All. A poem, a painting, a bamboo tree, an individual person may all be vehicles or metaphors to express "the cosmic illumination of the pure Awareness" (p. 81). Thus understood, "Oriental Nothingness" is both that which is full in that it can "manifest itself as anything in the empirical dimension of our experience," or as that which *cannot* be identified with any determinate thing or things. It is commonly remarked that that which is beyond determinate

characterization may be termed "Nothing," or, insofar as it may manifest itself as anything, "Everything." It is both Everything and Nothing, Being and Non-Being, without characteristics and having all possible characteristics.

The extraordinary experience of Zen, then, is simply Awareness before it is bifurcated into subject and object, before conceptualization and determination of any kind. It is truly beyond language. It is that which cannot be spoken of. It is neither an awareness *of* something, nor an awareness *by* something. It is an *empty* awareness. Not that the awareness itself is barren, or contentless, but that it is a content which is a dynamic fullness, having no characteristics at all—it is indeterminate, and as such is the Place of all determinateness. Nothingness is the Place where absolute Nothingness happens, and where Everything happens, as well. It is not that most of us have *lost* our sense of the Field of Nothing, but that we have not yet struggled sufficiently to find it. We have looked so intently at the world's ten-thousand figures that we have remained blind to the Ground gleaming within and beneath them.