

Nihilism and Śūnyatā

(concluded)

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VIII

IN the field of consciousness things are posited as objective beings, with a self-conscious ego being set up opposite them as a subjective being. Things are then "reality" in the sense of entities external to us, although the very fact that they are external is owing to the standpoint of man's consciousness. Things said to exist outside the subject are fundamentally (that is, epistemologically) still inside the compass of subjectivity. That something is an "object" means simply that it is objectivized, that it is represented as an object. That a thing exists objectively and lies beyond all conscious representation is only possible by its being represented as something beyond representation. It is a paradox essentially involved in representation (and hence in the "object" as well), and the *aporia* inherent in the very field of consciousness.

When the field of consciousness is broken through so as to open up *nihilum* at its base, and all things are so to speak "nihilized" and deprived of their "reality," the subjective being makes this *nihilum* the field of self-emancipation and through this subjectivized *nihilum* becomes more authentically subjective. Also, by saying that things are divested of the character of external reality, I do not mean they simply turn out to be illusions, rather that in their being divested of the character of external reality they simultaneously escape from the subjective, representative character that lies hidden behind what is

* This part concludes the translation of Chapter Three of *Shūkyō to wa Nanika* ("What is Religion?"), Sōbunsha, 1961. A translation of Chapter One appeared in *Philosophical Studies of Japan*, Vol. 2; Chapter Two in the *Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. III, No. 1 & 2; the first two parts of Chapter Three appeared in the *Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. IV, No. 2 and Vol. V, No. 1.

called external reality. They move a step further outside the paradox of representation just mentioned.

In the field of *nibilum* things cease to be objects and as a result disclose themselves as the reality wholly beyond representation. "Wholly beyond representation" here is diametrically opposed to the "objective" existence of things that are hiddenly represented so as to appear external and beyond representation. While in the field of consciousness, reality that is "external" and independent of representation arises only by way of representation, in the field of *nibilum*, where things are deprived of external reality as objects, they escape this representative character and reveal themselves in their own reality.

When the field of *nibilum* is opened up at the ground of both subject and object at once, when it appears from behind the relationship of subject and object, it always presents itself as a field that has been from the first there at the ground of that relationship.

What seems to make things and ourselves unreal in fact makes them more really emerge; as Heidegger says, "The being of beings reveals itself in the nihilization of *nibilum*." The field of *nibilum* is thus the field where the subject becomes more authentically subjective, and at the same time things reveal themselves more in reality.

Then, if we advance further and turn away even from that field of *nibilum* to the field of emptiness (if we, as was said before, go from a right-angle turn to a one hundred and eighty or even a complete three hundred and sixty degree turn), in what mode of being do things disclose themselves on the field of emptiness? This is the question I have raised in the above.

Of course, in the field of emptiness, things are not merely subjective representations as idealism asserts, nor are they merely objective beings or external realities independent of consciousness as realism and materialism insist. However independent things may be of consciousness—although this already, as I pointed out before, is not so simple as one might suppose—they cannot be independent of *nibilum*. No thing whatsoever can be freed from *nibilum*. They return sooner or later to nothing, so that they only exist as essentially non-existent and unreal, and yet they exist really and authentically precisely because of their being unreal. It is, moreover, in *nibilum* that the being of existing things can be revealed, questioned, and comprehended. The being of things is comprehended by the subject that has become authentically sub-

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jectivized in *nibilum*, at one with the being of the subject itself. For this reason, no thing whatsoever can be independent of *nibilum*. The field of *nibilum* far transcends the field of consciousness in which the opposition between materialism and idealism obtains, much more so the field of emptiness, in which alone the abyss of *nibilum* can arise.

Neither the sphere of consciousness nor that of *nibilum* can exist apart from the field of emptiness. Prior to the aspect of things objectivized as external reality in the field of consciousness and prior to their more authentic aspect of being nihilized in the field of *nibilum*, all things are in the field of emptiness in their truly authentic and original aspect. In emptiness, things truly and ultimately abide at their own home. At the same time, prior to objective consciousness grounded upon representation and prior to the perception of being in *nibilum*, the truly authentic and original knowing establishes itself in emptiness as the absolute this-side. It is the knowing that arises at the very place where it can be said that "all things advance forward and confirm the self," or that "hills, rivers, the earth, plants and trees, tiles and stones, all of these are the self's original part": it can perhaps be called a kind of "knowing of unknowing." Here the self is truly on its own home-ground. Where plants and trees are radically and simply plants and trees, where tiles and stones are tiles and stones through and through, and self-identically with this fact, the self is radically the self. This is the knowing of unknowing, a self-awareness which is none other than the field of emptiness. Let us consider this in a little more detail.

From ancient Greece to the present day, in the history of Western thought being or existence can be said to have been dealt with in most cases in terms of the category of substance or the category of (personal) subject. Whether inanimate or animate thing, human being or even God, when one takes something as a being-in-itself, its beingness is considered usually as substance. The concept of substance indicates in something that which makes it be itself, that which makes it preserve its self-identity in spite of the incessant changes that occur in its more or less "accidental" properties. We must say, however, that we come to the concept of substance regarding something only because we view it from the outset as an "object," or (from the opposite side) as a thing posited in front of, viewed from, and represented by the subject. This involves the paradox of representation spoken of before. It is the

same in the case of "life" or "soul" being considered in terms of substantiality. Once the circumstance that lies behind the forming of the concept of substance is brought to light, it is natural to propose, as Kant did, the basic position that all objects are representations, and therefore "appearances," and to interpret substance as one of the *a priori* pure concepts of understanding, as something which the thinking activity "thinks into" (*bineindenken*) objects. (In spite of this, the paradox of representation remains unsolved. Kant tries to avoid it by means of the distinction between "appearances" and things-in-themselves," or phenomena and *noumena*.)

Such a state of affairs lurking behind the forming of the concept of substance gives rise to the idea of a "subject" as something that rejects any objective comprehension whatsoever. Although Kant, of course, marks an epoch in the awakening of the subject in that sense, the same awakening has made a remarkable advancement after him, and continued all the way to the existential subjectivity, that is, to the existence "ecstatically" thrust into *nihilum*. The subject now comes to find itself in *nihilum* "essentially." It exists in such a way as to disclose there its own beingness. Generally, that *nihilum* opens up at the base of a being means that the field is opened up where its beingness, its essential mode of being, is disclosed. Thus in *nihilum* both things and subject return to their essential mode of being, to their ground where they are from the first in and of themselves.

But at the same time, their beingness itself becomes totally a question-mark. It becomes something of which we know neither whence it comes or whither it goes, something essentially incomprehensible and unnameable. Each and every thing, no matter how familiar and acquainted it may be to the self, is originally a thing unknown in that basic sense. The self as a subject also in regard to its own origin, that is, in its "beingness" as such, is something unnamed that refuses to be determined in any way. It is what I meant when, speaking of the "Great Doubt," I said that the self becomes a realization of the Doubt.¹ When the being of things is disclosed on the plane of *nihilum*, it is disclosed as a real "doubt," and the being of the self also appears in its original aspect, the aspect of an enigma to the self. There, in the so-called Great

1. *Eastern Buddhist* Vol V, No. 1, p.64.

Doubt, things and the self revert to their essential mode of being in which they have been from the beginning.

The traditional ontology cannot be said to have pursued the issue of being to such depths. The field wherein the being itself of the questioner about being becomes a question-mark has never been disclosed. Traditional ontology has never stepped outside the merely "theoretical" standpoint that only asks about "being," a standpoint in which the questioner and the questioned are set apart from each other. It could not reach the place of the manifestation of the Great Doubt, the field where the questioner and the questioned simultaneously manifest themselves as a question-mark, and where there is only present the one great Doubt. Ontology must move through nihilism to a new, entirely different plane.

But if in *nihilum* being itself is disclosed and becomes directly a question-mark, the standpoint of *nihilum* cannot be the standpoint able to solve the question. It is a standpoint that merely declares the need of an inevitable turnabout. If in *nihilum* every thing reveals its original enigmatic aspect at one with the subject, the standpoint of *nihilum* must itself be transcended. It is in this, as I have repeatedly pointed out above, that the standpoint of emptiness reveals itself.

It should be obvious that in the standpoint of emptiness the being itself of something can no longer be said to consist in "substance" or "subject," for in *nihilum* both become the question. But can we conceive of a mode of being that is neither subjective or substantial? No matter how difficult it may be to imagine this, the need for such a new perspective in regard to the approach to beingness is not to be denied. The concept of substance as well as that of subject is established after all on the field of subject-object duality; the former is concerned with the "object" and presupposes the "subject," and it is the same with the latter, *mutatis mutandis*. This field of duality is broken through by *nihilum* in which, as I said above, things and the self are brought back to their ground; where, however, the concepts of substance and subject must lose their ground that is no other than the subject-object duality itself. Thus, in the field of *nihilum*, the being of things as well as of the self becomes thoroughly questionable by being transported to a region beyond the reach of "logical" thinking. It follows as a necessary consequence that with the further turning away from *nihilum*, that is, within emptiness, the mode of being

of things as well as of the self can be neither subjective nor substantial. The mode of being of things when they are truly on their own home-ground in their ultimate being-in-themselves, or in their selfness wholly beyond all modes of being in which they are reflected upon the subject-object relation, cannot be substantial, much less subjective. Equally, the mode of being of the self, when it is ultimately on its own home-ground and in its true selfness, cannot be subjective, much less substantial. If so, what mode of being is being-in-itself in the ultimate sense—more simply, “selfness”—which is neither substance nor subject?

IX

Both the concepts of substance and of subject provide each in its own way the mode of being in which something is and remains what it is within constantly changing, transitory conditions. So far, we can say that substance and subject each refer to the mode of being-in-itself. But do they truly render the reality of that mode of being?

A child is making a fire in the garden. There is a fire. “Substance” indicates in the fire that which determines it as fire. It signifies the self-identity, the is-ness of the fire. What distinguishes it from the earth, the yard tools, and the firewood stacked nearby, the essential property of fire, the power and activity of burning fire, may be said to constitute fire’s substance. In it, one can possibly see fire’s mode of being-in-itself, its selfness.

But in this case the mode of being of fire as fire is clearly grasped in the aspect in which it appears to us, and hence to the extent we recognize it. Fire’s substance is the “form” (*eidos*) of fire. Here fire manifests its selfness to us. This way of manifestation of a thing is its “form” and the field of “form” is the place where we can distinguish fire from anything else and recognize in combustion its essential property. Here moreover we can discern intellectually or analyze scientifically the process which is called combustion, and thereby express what fire is, that is, its substance. If this expression is the “definition” of fire, then combustion may be said to have the role of moment that constitutes the main content of the definition (the so-called specific difference). That its substance is thus set forth as a “logical” structure and rendered capable of being explained theoretically, means that it can be seen from the standpoint of reason. That is, although “substance” indicates fire’s selfness,

it is so only insofar as it can be recognized through reason, in the aspect in which it appears to and is conceived by us.

To sum up, the field in which we comprehend a thing's mode of being-in-itself as its form, the field in which the concept of substance arises, has a twofold character: on the one hand it is the field wherein a thing discloses *its own* selfness, and on the other it is the field where *we* comprehend the thing's selfness. This is a characteristic feature of the field of *logos* or reason. Here, we must say the thing is still grasped as an object (and hence, from the opposite side, from the point of view of the subject). No matter how rigorously the grasping of a thing as "substance" insists on viewing things in their selfness, or speaks of viewing them from within themselves, it is still a grasping on a field that unfolds so as to have reason inserted within things.

From ancient times, reason has been called the standpoint of accordance or identification of subject and object. The field of reason is one in which the seer and the seen are found basically to make a unity. This means the field of reason is one in which things disclose themselves in their mode of being-in-itself. It also means that, different from merely subjective passions and imagination, reason's cognition possesses objectivity. On the other hand, however, in spite of reason consisting of the accordance or even identification of seer and seen, it has time and again been observed that in this rational contemplation or intellectual intuition, there still remains traces of the "two" of seer and seen. In other words, the objectivity of reason's cognition implies the selfness of a thing is grasped, but at the same time, traces remain of its being viewed externally as an objective being. Such is the standpoint of reason, in which the selfness of a thing is apprehended as substance.

Because of this, the field of reason is not one where a thing can be on the home-ground of its being-in-itself. It is not the proper place in which the true mode of being of a thing's selfness is established.

In order to approach the fact "*that* fire is," reason always goes through the process of asking "*what* fire is." Its approach is from essential being to actual being. I think we find in Aristotle the most outstanding example of such a way of thinking. That fire actually burns is due to something burnable (for example, firewood) being burned. The actual existence of fire is supported by the firewood. He holds that fire's burnability is due to the fact that the nature (*physis*) of fire is latent in the firewood. Burning, to use Aristotle's termino-

logy, is something that develops from latent possibility (or *dynamis*) to real actuality (or *energeia*).

But firewood cannot catch fire by itself. It is always in need of actual fire. In the same way, a child's learning the alphabet and learning to read is the actualization of an ability (possibility) latent in him. Indispensable for developing the child's reading activity from potentiality to actuality, however, is a teacher who already knows how to read. A pine tree is a development of the nature (*physis*) latent in its seed, yet this seed in its turn is generated by a parent tree possessed of the same nature. Everything exists in this circular development between possibility and actuality. And this circular development is ruled throughout by the essential being, the *physis* of the fire or the pine tree.

Considering essential being as the *physis* (natural essence) of a thing, Aristotle proceeded from essential being to actual being. Here the structure of being he thought to consist in "form" and "matter." In the actuality of the fire, in its activity of combustion, the being itself of fire manifests itself as "form." And that manifestation occurs as an emergence out of the potentiality latent in the combustible "matter." To think of a development from potentiality to actuality is an attempt to connect "form" to "matter" and to look for the substrate of the former in the direction of the latter. The endeavor to grasp the being of things as objective beings from the standpoint of reason stands out in bold relief. Seen from the opposite side, the being of things is still grasped from the point of view of the subject. This is the same characteristic I pointed out before in the position that conceives of the *logos*-structure of being. In fact, the dynamic view of the developmental relation of possibility and actuality as well as the static view of the structural relation of matter and form are conceived—roughly speaking, as I cannot enter into a detailed discussion of this problem—in accordance with the "logical" relation in a "theoretical" definition, that is, the relation of the concept of genus and the concept of species with its specific difference.

In short, it is characteristic of the standpoint of reason that the ontological structure-coherence in the being-in-themselves of things is perceived in the thinking of the subject concerned with it as a necessary connection of its thought content. Therefore, we can say the standpoint of reason is an attempt to approach the actual being of something (*that it is*) through the medium of

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its essential being (*what it is*). This means that it is not a standpoint capable of directly penetrating to the precise point where something *is*. It is not capable of placing itself directly in the very place of a thing's selfness, where it originally is and stands in itself, or where it stays at home, in its selfness. But is it after all possible to place oneself in such a standpoint? If it is possible, then what mode of being is this in a thing? What is our own mode of being when we take ourselves there?

X

Substance is that in which a thing preserves its self-identity; it denotes the selfness of a thing in the form in which its selfness is revealed to us. If so, what is a thing's mode of being completely apart from its manifestation to us? What is its genuine mode of selfness? As was stated before, Eckhart describes Godhead or God's "essence" in terms of an entirely formless, absolute "nothingness"; the place where God is in his own home-ground is beyond all forms whatsoever, in which He reveals Himself to his creatures; in particular, beyond the "personal" forms through which He reveals Himself to man. We are here, with respect to all that exists, including even "plants and trees, tiles and stones," concerned with a similar meaning of "essence." We are concerned with a mode of being in which a thing originally *is*, standing on its own home-ground of being and preserving its own self-identity as selfness.

In my view, the key to this problem is contained within a matter that has been given attention in the East from ancient times, and given expression in such phrases as: "Fire does not burn fire," "Water does not wash water," "The eye does not see the eye." The expression that fire does not burn fire refers of course to the self-identity of fire. This, however, is not the self-identity of fire as a "substance" on a standpoint from which we view it as an object. It is rather the self-identity of fire as "selfness" on its own home-ground of being, that is, it is the self-identity of fire to fire itself.

In the sense that fire is something that is unable to burn fire, the phrase "Fire does not burn fire" speaks of the *essential* being of fire. Yet it also means that there is a fire *actually* burning, that here there is actually fire. That there is actually a fire burning vigorously means that the fire does not burn itself; that it is insisting on being in itself and is existing in its selfness. In the mode of being of fire-not-burning-itself, therefore, the fire's essential being and

actual being are one. That expression indicates directly the self-identity of fire on its own home-ground of being.

This is fundamentally different from the case in which "substance" is conceived of as denoting the selfness of fire. What is described here by the word "self-identical" could never be "substance." "Substance" denotes the self-identity of a fire as recognized in its *energeia* (the being-at-work) of combustion, that is, in the mode of being in which it is acting as fire, in which fire is actually fire. On the contrary, when we assert that fire does not burn fire, what is indicated is the act of fire's not-burning, act as not-acting.

If we make a distinction for a moment between the fact that fire burns firewood, and the fact that it does not burn itself, then the burning that occurs when the fire burns firewood shows the selfness of fire, and fire being unable to burn itself likewise shows its selfness. These two circumstances are here one and the same. As something that burns firewood, fire does not burn itself, as something that does not burn itself, it burns firewood. This is the true mode of being of fire as fire, the true self-identity of fire. Only where it does not burn itself is fire truly on its own home-ground. This is not only the selfness of fire with regard to us, it is also fire's selfness with regard to itself. That means this is completely different from a "substance" that denotes the self-identity of fire only in its *energeia* of combustion. If the substance of fire is recognized in the *energeia* of combustion, then the fact that fire is burning only as something not burning itself can be truly said to show directly the selfness of fire. That fire does not burn itself means that fire is, at the base of its mode of being in suchness, not simply *substantia* and that its selfness differs from something described by the concept of substance.

As I have repeatedly said, the view has been generally held that the fact that a thing is itself and self-identical can be adequately described with the concept of substance; the view from the standpoint of reason, based upon the field of *logos*. Here the self-identity of a thing, *substantia*, is grasped logically as a "category" in the logic of being. Or rather, it is grasped from the first so as to be made susceptible of being logically grasped. It is in this way—the way basically of the traditional ontology as metaphysics—that we usually think of a thing's self-identity, of the fact that something is itself.

But the true mode of being of a thing-in-itself, its self-identity in the sense of "selfness" described above, differs so radically from self-identity in the sense

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of substance, that it implies a thorough negation of the latter conception and with it a turnabout of the standpoint of reason and all its logical thinking. For instance, against the view which in a fire takes notice solely of the aspect of its work of combustion (its *energeia*) and recognizes in it the self-identity of fire, whereby it is actually fire and whereby *there is* actually fire, the selfness of fire, as was expressed by "fire does not burn fire," must demand a totally different view that can also connote that aspect in which the complete negation of the substantial self-identity manifests itself. If we suppose within the potency and activity of burning the *physis* (natural essence), or in Buddhist terminology the so-called *jisbō* (self-nature), of fire, the selfness of fire must be said to lie in its so-called *mu-jisbō* (no-self-nature). While the concept of substance grasps the selfness of a fire merely in its own fire-nature (hence as *being*), its true selfness is "no fire-nature." The selfness of fire lies in non-burning. Of course, this non-burning cannot exist apart from burning. Fire is non-burning right in its burning. The point is, however, that the burning cannot in fact be conceived of without its non-burning, i.e. as long as the perspective of fire's not burning itself remains unopened. That a fire is sustaining itself in burning proves that it does not burn itself. Essentially, non-combustion is the ground of combustion. Because of non-combustion, combustion is combustion. The *mu-jisbō* of a fire is its home-ground of being. So also with water. Water washes something because it does not wash itself.

For this reason, we must say that the self-identity of a fire being a fire cannot be conceived of apart from its non-burning. "Fire-nature" is real as such only as the fire-nature of no fire-nature. Fire's genuine self-identity lies not in a *substantia* or *jisbō* conceptualized from its aspect of combustion, but rather arises only in the turnabout of that viewpoint, in the appearance of the aspect of non-combustion. Stated more concretely, genuine self-identity consists in the self-identity between that substantial self-identity (as being) and its absolute negation. Our usual utterance at the sight of a fire, that "this is fire," is mostly not true: that is, so long as the utterance is made from the position which recognizes the fire only in the aspect of burning. Since the real truth begins from negating such a position, we can even say that the utterance, "this is not fire," is nearer the truth. Only on the plane where this becomes possible is "this is fire" established as truth. "This is not fire, therefore it is fire"—to use the formula set forth in the *Diamond Sutra*—is the truth of "this is fire," the

authentic way of directly denoting fire's selfness and of expressing the true reality of fire.

If all this sounds strange, it is only because we ordinarily place ourselves on the position of reason, in the word's broad sense, not merely in our everyday life but also in science and even in philosophy, and judge and view things (though on each field in a different way) from there where we do not touch the reality of things. We can touch their reality only on a field absolutely different and absolutely transcendent from judgements and views based upon reason. It is the field of a thing's selfness described above, the field of a thing's self-identity *pro seipsum* and not *pro nobis*. And since this field is absolutely different from the standpoint of everyday life, of science, or philosophical thinking, the self-identity of a thing on this field—for instance, the stubborn fact that this is fire—can be truly expressed paradoxically as, “this is not fire, therefore it is fire.”

This absolutely transcendent field is none other than the field of “emptiness” which, as described previously, opens itself ultimately at this-side, and is the absolute this-side.

However, an adequate explication of the position of emptiness is possible when we take into consideration not only the concept of substance but also that of personal subject. Only then will we be able to pursue radically the problems I have brought up in the above; the problem of personality and materiality, and also the problem of the modes of being of a thing and of a self, when it is said that “all things advance forward and practice and confirm the self,” or that “hills and rivers, the earth, plants and trees, tiles and stones, all are the self's own original part.”²

Translated by Yamamoto Seisaku

2. *Ibid.*, p. 69.