

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The fact that this staff is a staff is a fact in such a way as to involve at the same time the deliverance of the self. . . .

"Illuminating insight" does not stop at mere contemplation. It is integrated with the deliverance of all beings in time from the universal suffering of the world.¹

In these few simple words we have, I believe, the deepest stirrings of a mind for whom the cognitive pursuit of reality is inseparably bound up with those ultimate concerns that have come to be known as religion. In them we have the very heart of the challenge that the thought of Keiji Nishitani poses to Western modes of philosophical reason and religious speculation.

It seems only fitting, therefore, that we look further into the meaning of this challenge, and the wider intellectual environment from which it stems, by way of introduction to the essays offered here in English translation.²

THE EASTERN BACKGROUND

It is a testimony to his integrity and seriousness as a philosopher that I must begin with the claim that Nishitani's thought can only be understood against the background of Japanese culture, both in its historical role as the final receptacle of the eastward drive of the cultures of India and China, and in its contemporary position as the one country in the world where East and West confront one another clearly and in full array. Indeed, one might say that the particular appeal of his thought for us lies precisely in the fact that its *universality* is mediated by this *regionality*.

In this regard, the following passage, appearing in the preface to the first substantial philosophical text of the Kyoto School (the tradition to which Nishitani belongs) to be presented to the English-speaking world over twenty years ago, is still very much to the point:

While the history of Japanese metaphysical speculation, based on peculiarly Asian religious experiences, goes back to the eleventh century, Japanese philosophy as organized in accordance with Western concepts and assumptions is barely a century old. Ever since they came in contact with the culture and philosophy of the West, Japanese thinkers have considered it their task to search for a harmonious integration of two philosophical worlds; to reformulate, in the categories of an alien Western philosophy, the philosophical insights of their own past.³

In the case of the present book, the reader will no doubt soon observe that while Western philosophers are frequently brought into the discussion (and modern Japanese thinkers virtually passed over), Nishitani is particularly fond of calling to mind and "worrying to death" any number of old Japanese and Chinese texts, wrestling with them until he has secured the blessing he seeks. This material belongs almost entirely to the Buddhist tradition, which reached Japan by way of China and Korea in the sixth century of the Christian era, and has deeply impressed the mind of Japan and come to form the core of its intellectual life for these many centuries since.⁴ The words of Dōgen, the thirteenth-century founder of the Sōtō Zen sect in Japan, will be found to loom especially large here. And indeed, Nishitani's works in general attest to a strong affinity with the thought of that extraordinary religious and intellectual giant whose works, in the pure pragmatism of their religious intent, can never be captured under the label of "spiritual reading" and leave us no choice but to speak of them as "metaphysical speculation."

In reading Nishitani, then, we must constantly keep in mind the way his thought follows along a path of Eastern speculation cut out of the same bedrock through which the Buddhist stream flows. Only when we are open to finding there a "rational" explication of an Eastern experience of life that is legitimately different from our own, and in many ways complementary to it, can we come to an appreciation of what Nishitani is trying to do. For at every turn Nishitani emphatically makes these Eastern insights his own while probing their relevance for contemporary life and their relationship to Western philosophical theories and religious tenets.

While there is no need even to attempt here a resumé of the rich variety of that speculative world, two ideas at least should be singled out

as fundamental to the whole structure. Together they combine to render impossible, from the very start, the sort of dependency on and concentration of attention toward the subject-object relationship which characterizes Western thinking. In the first place, we have the notion of *pratītya-samutpāda* or "conditioned co-production," according to which reality is seen as a boundless web of interrelations whose momentary nodes make up the "things" of experience. It is pure relation without substance. It leaves covetous man with nothing to cling to, nothing to become attached to. But the grasping, clinging subject itself is no more substantial than things, because of a second notion, that of *anātman* or non-ego, according to which the basic self-affirmation through which man makes himself a permanent center of his world is undercut. In its stead, man is made to lose himself in an "All are One" or a "formless nothingness."

This may perhaps look less like an explanation of reality to us than like a pure and simple *reductio ad nihilum* of the facts of experience. To be sure, original Buddhism, where these ideas first found systematic expression, is world-negating in the extreme; and the reduction of all reality to a cosmic dream or "mind-only" is the ever-present and alluring Lorelei of Eastern speculation. Yet the main point for us to grasp here—and Nishitani goes to great lengths to make us see it—seems to be that this does not mean a mere doing away with the world, that it is not what we would call a simple negation of reality, but an alternative and ultimately positive view of reality that might even be termed a "radical empiricism."

In an effort to explain this, Japanese thinkers frequently refer us to Japanese and Chinese art:

Eastern paintings do not aim at the expression of the real form of things; and even if they do portray the form of things, they do not portray the things themselves; by means of them they express the soul, but this soul is nothing other than the formless world. On the surface of the canvas the blank spaces dominate. These blank spaces are wholly different from the *backgrounds* of Western paintings. Instead the blank spaces are expressed by the form of the things portrayed.⁵

In this same regard we recall the famous words of Kitarō Nishida:

In contradistinction to Western culture which considers form as existence and formation as good, the urge to see the form of the formless, and hear the sound of the soundless, lies at the foundation of Eastern culture.⁶

In brief, the Western mind cannot but think that all reality has been done away with when all "being" (form, substance) has been negated;

but the East has found that the removal of the immediate and overpowering face of reality is but a necessary condition for what is really real to appear.

Obviously this metaphysical position and everything it entails was not reached all at once. Indian art, for example, even in its overtly Buddhist representations, shows a marked difference from such a view. Its cluttered surfaces, tangled with figures that seem to undulate together in a restless *pullulatio* of movement, seem to tell us: "form is fullness." In Hīnayāna Buddhism, on the other hand, we find the opposite extreme where all things are declared to be void: "form is emptiness." It is only in the Mahāyāna tradition, Nishitani would argue, that Buddhism reaches a synthesis of affirmation and negation. There things become an expression of the void, enabling the complete formulation that often serves it as a kind of motto: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Hīnayāna Buddhism finds its salvific negation or nirvāna (that is to say, its "sacred") in a world apart from and beyond the world of saṃsāra teeming with illusory appearances of individual realities. Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the other hand, locates nirvāna squarely within this secular world of form and asserts that it is there that nirvāna finds its self-expression. The Kegon and Tendai philosophies that developed out of Chinese Buddhism surely represent important steps in the full elaboration of this view. Nishitani, however, seldom refers to them directly and, even then, reserves his allusions for the most part to those cases in which he finds their ideas reflected in Zen speculation. In contrast, the Indian originator of the complete viewpoint of emptiness, Nāgārjuna, seems to be granted a position of central importance.⁷

There can be no doubt, then, that we have in Nishitani a modern representative of an Eastern speculative tradition every bit as old and as variegated as the Western philosophical endeavor. But that tradition was also said to be "based on peculiarly Asian religious experiences." For the fact is that it is something that developed in unison with religious objectives and practices, without ever setting itself up as a system of "objective" knowledge, complete in itself and detached from the realm of the religious. In this sense, we might refer to it as "intrinsically religious." Hence when we speak of "Buddhist philosophy," we need to understand thereby a mode of speculation that takes as its radical point of departure the Buddhist religious experience of reality as expressed in the Four Holy Truths, provides a systematic explanation of that religious doctrine and its attitude, and constructs for it an appropriate logic.

The Christian West does not possess anything comparable in the way of a "Christian philosophy." Even after the advent of Christianity, Western philosophy held fast to its Greek roots and did not make a fundamental shift in orientation to serve as an explanation of the Christian religious experience. The same could be said of either the Judaic or the Islamic religious experience vis-à-vis Western philosophy. As a result, we find religion and philosophy coexisting in conditions laden with tensions. The individual tends to assume one world view, for example, in moments of spiritual reading and another in moments of rational analysis. It is different with Buddhist philosophy, where the unity of the religious and the speculative has never been severed. The German theologian Hans Waldenfels puts it this way in speaking of Nāgārjuna: "Whatever he has to say philosophically all has to do with clearing the way for enlightenment and with the radical liberation of man from all false attachments that obstruct that way."⁸ So, too, we find thinkers like Heinrich Dumoulin remarking similarly of Zen that it shows "the most intimate relationship between experience and doctrine. . . . Metaphysical speculation, religious practice, and mystical experience come very near each other and form a unity."⁹

The questions all this confronts us with seem to converge at three principal points. First: *What has this intrinsically religious logic to teach theology, especially Christian theology?* Second: *What has this speculation to teach us about the structure of reality in general?* A fair portion of the representatives of this speculation, and Nishitani is clearly among them, are carried along by the conviction that only on this level is truly *real* reality revealed to man: "When we speak of things 'as they truly are in themselves,' we are on the field of religion."¹⁰ And third: *Can this speculation stand by itself, apart from religious practice, in logical autonomy and thus be considered philosophy in the Western sense?* On the one hand, we need to inquire into what D. T. Suzuki meant when he wrote that "Nishida's philosophy . . . is difficult to understand, I believe, unless one is passably acquainted with Zen experience."¹¹ On the other hand, if there is one thing that distinguishes Nishitani and his colleagues of the Kyoto School from their Buddhist predecessors, it is their confrontation with Western philosophy and their determination to see their speculation as expressly philosophical in some "scientific" sense or other of the term. It is to ask if the caesura the Kyoto School effects between religion and speculation is the same as that seen to obtain between religion and philosophy in the West. In its most precise form, the question asks after the logic adopted by the Kyoto School. Its

representatives seem to agree that their logic is necessarily dialectical in the highest degree, indeed "more dialectical than Hegel's logic." But we want to know at what point this sort of logic not only stretches the confines of reason but springs free of those confines altogether.¹²

THE KYOTO SCHOOL

At this point something further needs to be said regarding the term "Kyoto School" that I have been using rather freely so far. Briefly put, the Kyoto School is a way of philosophizing—more of a philosophical ethos than a unified system of thought—which developed in the departments of philosophy and religion at the State University of Kyoto under the initial inspiration of Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), widely acknowledged as the foremost philosopher of Japan since the time of the Meiji Restoration. In the words of Yoshinori Takeuchi, one of the principal contemporary representatives of the Kyoto School: "It is no exaggeration to say that in him Japan has had the first philosophical genius who knew how to build a system permeated with the spirit of Buddhist meditation by fully employing the Western method of thinking."¹³

The basic characteristics of the Kyoto School have already been hinted at: a thoroughgoing loyalty to its own traditions, a committed openness to Western traditions, and a deliberate attempt to bring about a synthesis of East and West. As Nishitani himself writes:

We Japanese have fallen heir to two completely different cultures. . . . This is a great privilege that Westerners do not share in . . . but at the same time this puts a heavy responsibility on our shoulders: to lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making, for a new world united beyond differences of East and West.¹⁴

It is these characteristics, I would submit, together with the high level of competence with which the task they contain has been performed, that recommend the efforts of the Kyoto School to our attention, and make it altogether regrettable that this philosophical tradition has yet to be adequately introduced to the world at large.¹⁵

As noted above, the dream of a synthesis has been with Japanese intellectuals ever since the inclusion of philosophy as an integral part of the Western culture imported during the Meiji era. That such a dream should have been engendered is hardly to be wondered at, though we should not therefore overlook the overwhelming odds it faces to become a reality. In fact, during the first generations the appreciation of Western philosophy by Japanese scholars was somewhat superficial, which is understandable enough given their previous moorings in Confucian

and Buddhist thought. At best their efforts led to a crude sort of syncretism. The past fifty years have brought pitfalls of their own. For one thing there is the conversion to a Westernized system of education, which may have contributed to a better appreciation of Western philosophy, but at the same time has left most Japanese intellectuals weakened in self-confidence toward their own traditions. Moreover, if we add to the higher levels of scholastic sophistication the peculiar Japanese tendency to compartmentalize, the inevitable result is that most Japanese scholars of Western philosophy get stuck within the narrow limits of their chosen field of specialization. While the degree of competence this enables is often remarkable indeed, there is every reason to deplore the fact that departments of Western philosophy (called *tetsugaku* 哲学 according to a neologism coined by its first advocates) and Indian philosophy (generally combined with Buddhist Studies and called *Indo tetsugaku*) carry on side by side in blissful ignorance of one another. Finally, we have to admit that departments of Western philosophy tend to mirror faithfully every movement taking place on the Western scene without showing much dynamism of their own or taking root in their native Japanese situation.

Against this backdrop the Kyoto School stands out as the single great exception, which the rest of Japanese academia does not very well know what to do with. To read through the works of its thinkers is to be struck by the resemblances to German idealism and its offshoots. And to be sure, that tradition has had considerable impact on Japan. As T. Shimomura notes, after the initial waves of French positivism and Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism, "in the 1890s, German philosophy became the mainstream." The reason for that special interest, he contends, "resides largely in the fact that that philosophy combines a deep moral and religious character with a strict logical and speculative character."¹⁶ If we try to pin that affinity down more precisely, we come to two related traits: the recourse to dialectical logic and the resonances of mysticism.

The use of paradox is everywhere apparent in the writings of the Kyoto School, and contradiction is clearly considered not only to be logically meaningful but to be the sole means to drive the mind on to truly real reality. This trait is most pronounced in Nishida's definition of the real as a "self-identity of absolute contradictories" (or more freely and familiarly rendered, as a "coincidence of opposites"). Whatever other differences there may be between them, on this point Nishitani follows in the footsteps of Nishida, whose "dialectic is not so much the

process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, but a discovery of contradictions and the unity or identity in these contradictions."¹⁷

Now while style and terminology may remind us of German idealism, the real source of this dialectical language, let it be remembered, is to be found in the Mahāyāna speculation alluded to earlier, and most immediately in the paradoxical way of speaking peculiar to Zen. In this connection, special attention needs to be given to the role of the conjunctive *soku* [即] (translated here as *sive*) in Sino-Japanese Mahāyāna. Put between two contradictory concepts (for instance in the formula, "emptiness-*sive*-form, form-*sive*-emptiness"), it is meant to draw off the total reality of the two poles into itself as their constitutive and ontologically prior unity. It indicates the only point or "place" at which the opposites are *realized* and display their true reality. In order more clearly to show the "inverse correspondence" or "identity through negation" at work here, this has at times been referred to as the logic of *soku/hi* (*sive/non*) [即非].

Before turning to the mystical element in the philosophy of the Kyoto School—or rather, to establish its relationship with the element of paradox more firmly—we may pause here for a brief look at Nishitani's peculiar use of spatial metaphor just referred to in the context of the *soku*. At every turn we find him referring to the "place" or "point" [ところ *tokoro*] at which events occur, to the "field" [場 *ba*] of being or emptiness, to the "standpoint" [立場 *tachiba*] of the subject on its field, and so forth. The use of such language, and the way of thinking behind it, reverts back to Nishida who spoke of the absolute as the "locus of absolute nothingness." While Nishitani himself does not often take the word "locus" [場所 *baso*] into use as such in the present work, the connection is unmistakable for those in the Kyoto School.

One's initial reaction might be to dismiss all of this as a mere vestige of spatial imagination, along with the rest of the allusions to dimension, horizon, plane, and so forth. There is, of course, no gainsaying the danger of being led astray by metaphorical terminology. Yet the frequency and consistency with which such speech appears even in our own descriptions of the absolute as a "transcendent"—whether "up there" or "out there"—should give us pause to pay it greater attention.

The notion of "locus" was first suggested to Nishida, it would appear, by the idea of *topos* in Plato's *Timaeus*, although he himself also refers to Aristotle's notion of *hypokeimenon* and Lask's field theory to explain its meaning. As Matao Noda has observed, "In this connection the modern physical concept of field of force, taken by Einstein as a

cosmic field, seems to have suggested much to Nishida.”¹⁸ Perhaps the first thing to remember in trying to understand what Nishida, and with him Nishitani, has in mind is that our everyday idea of “place” is not a mere nonexistent “nothing” and yet neither is it an existent “something.” It is more in the nature of what Jaspers calls an “encompassing” (*Umgreifendes*) that allows things to exist where they are: each on its own, and yet all together in a sort of oneness. The rest is a matter of degree. The place where things *are* can be envisaged at one end of the spectrum as determining things and binding them together in a purely external and superficial way; at the other, as defining their most intimate relationships and thus as constitutive of their very reality. The former is found in our commonsense notions of place; the latter is closer to the scientific idea of “field.” In the transition from the one to the other, what was originally seen as a kind of detached background becomes more immediately immanent,¹⁹ and the very idea of “background,” usually understood as something secondary that sets the stage for things, comes to take on the richer sense of *das Hintergründliche*, the hidden, deeper reality of things normally hidden from view.

A technical analysis of the concept of locus in Nishida, as indicated, needs to probe further the special appeal that Aristotle’s idea of matter has for him and to show how the notion of a *hypokeimenon*, as the non-being out of which all forms originate, was taken over by him. From there one would have to go into the dilemma in Aristotle’s logic by virtue of which the individual is sought for but never reached through the specification of the universal; and the way in which this led Nishida to seek a *principium individuationis* in universality itself which, pushed to its limits, ends up ultimately in a transcendental indetermination. Finally, we should have to consider Kant’s transcendental apperception as the unity of the subject, and the way in which this led Nishida to search for a unity wherein both subject and object would find their rightful place. Traces of all of these motifs are scattered throughout the essays presented here. It seems to me that this is not unconnected with the question about our sense of reality, about where we “locate” the truly real. In Christianity, all reality is said to be finally concentrated *in* the reality of God; for Plato, the really real is located in an intelligible world. For the Kyoto School, things are ultimately real on the field of emptiness, a place that is at once beyond our everyday encounter with things and yet where we do not encounter any reality—be it God or Idea—other than the reality of things themselves.

The critical importance of the concept of place is inseparable in turn

from the concept of nothingness (more correctly, absolute nothingness) or emptiness, which, as Shimomura reminds us, is commonly considered the basis of existence in the East. An idea fraught with mysticism, it was Nishida's achievement to have succeeded in grounding the idea of nothingness conceptually and logically through his idea of locus.²⁰ Mention has already been made of the cardinal role that nothingness plays in the Buddhist tradition on the whole. It can now be seen more particularly to serve as the keystone that holds together the elements of the paradoxical and the mystical in the Kyoto School.

Takeuchi sets East and West against one another in sharp contrast here:

The idea of "being" is the Archimedean point of Western thought. Not only philosophy and theology but the whole tradition of Western civilization have turned around this point. All is different in Eastern thought and Buddhism. The central notion from which Oriental religious intuition and belief as well as philosophical thought have been developed is the idea of "nothingness."²¹

Granted that this is basically the case, any attempt at a synthesis of East and West will have to reckon on bringing about a viable symbiosis. Provisionally, the way is left open either for assigning nothingness a fundamental role in Western modes of thought or for taking up being as a fundamental principle into Eastern modes of thought. As to which of these alternatives the Kyoto School follows in its pursuit of a synthesis, I would hazard the view that, at least on the surface, Nishida's writings seem rather to belong to the former, while the present work of Nishitani is clearly oriented to the latter.

In general, Oriental thinkers are fond of pointing out that, contrary to Western notions of nothingness, the Eastern notion is not a mere negative or *relative* nothingness, but an *absolute* nothingness that embraces both being and nothingness. In particular, Nishitani is said to have reached a "point" at which being coincides with nothingness.²² The question then becomes whether the Western notion of being in its full length and breadth, with its enormous force of affirmation (*Bejahung*), and with all the aspirations to self-transcendence it embodies, is really subsumed under Eastern nothingness, or whether it is manipulated as a kind of "antithesis" or steppingstone to that nothingness. I only raise the issue here as one that the reader of these pages will hardly be able to avoid.

The dominant role of nothingness in Eastern culture is radically bound up with the world-negating aspect of its religion, especially Buddhism, and owes its basically positive connotations to the fact that

this world-negation is seen from the outset as leading to, or containing in itself, salvation or true human realization. It is a "mystical idea" in the sense that life itself is seen not to have a direct value but rather to realize its value through death. Since the West possesses its own principles of world-negation or life-through-death, especially in Christianity, we are led to ask why the notion of nothingness never came to take a positive significance in the West and why it was never elevated to the status of a basic cultural principle. Perhaps an answer lies in the fact that for the East the principle of salvation was made into a basic principle for all reality—as for instance in Mahāyāna Buddhism's idea of *samsāra-sive-nirvāna*—and that the Kyoto School simply transfers this process to an ontological level in accord with the Western scheme of things. Would this not lead us to conclude that the West never made such a transference because the world-negation of its religion was not so radical, or because the whole content of its religion could not be represented in the aim of deliverance from this world?

As the words cited at the opening of this introduction testify, and as the book as a whole will confirm again and again, the philosophy of the Kyoto School is through and through religious. In the case of Nishida testimonies abound, all of them agreed that his philosophical inspiration belongs to Zen. To cite Shimomura once again: "Religious philosophy was the ultimate concern of his philosophical thinking from the very beginning until the very end. . . . Accordingly, he tried to include in philosophy also what in the West, perhaps as mysticism and as the limit of philosophical thought, philosophy stops short of."²⁴ Throughout the Kyoto School the conviction seems to hold sway that truly real reality is primarily to be found and its structure primarily revealed on the level of religion. "In religious Love or Compassion, the highest standpoint of all comes into view," writes Nishitani.²⁵ This would mean that the structure or logic of religious experience represents the prototype of every effort of the mind to grasp the truth of things. The question as to whether such a thing as "unsaved reality" can exist at all, and, if so, whether this might not have its own provisional structure and logic, is one that arises at once to the Western mind and appears to remain unanswered.

In a rather roundabout way, all of this may help to explain why a certain affinity with German idealism is to be found in the resonances of mysticism within the Kyoto School. More directly to the point perhaps is the passion for unity or *Alleinheit* that the two have in common. For Schinzingler, "Mahāyāna Buddhism is basically pantheistic; its prevail-

ing idea is that Buddha is in all things, and that all things have Buddha-nature. To comprehend the Buddha-nature in all things, an approach is required which . . . experiences absolute oneness."²⁶ The label of pantheism, modeled as it is after Western patterns of *Alleinheit*, is not altogether appropriate, and it is with good reason that both Nishida and Nishitani explicitly reject it. Some kind of absolute standpoint, however, is needed to get a full view of that standpoint. The Kyoto School appears to share with German idealism the truly philosophical conviction of the possibility of such a standpoint.

KEIJI NISHITANI

Keiji Nishitani is universally recognized as the present "dean" of the Kyoto School and standard-bearer of the tradition that began with his teacher and master, Nishida. Nishitani was born on February 27, 1900, in the same rural district (Ishikawa Prefecture) of central Japan as Nishida. When he was seven years old, his family moved to Tokyo where he received the rest of his formal education. After graduating from Japan's most prestigious college at the time, the Daiichi Kōtōgakkō, he moved to Kyoto where he has spent the rest of his adult life. In 1924 he graduated from the department of philosophy at the Kyoto Imperial University (since renamed Kyoto State University). In 1926 he took up a post lecturing in ethics and German at Kyoto's Imperial College and in 1928 assumed a lectureship at the Buddhist Ōtani University, both of which positions he held concurrently up until 1935, when he was called back to his alma mater and named professor in the department of religion. In 1955 he conceded his post in the department to Professor Yoshinori Takeuchi in order to assume the chair of modern philosophy until retiring in 1963. Since that time Kyoto has remained the center of his apparently unflagging activities as professor of philosophy and religion at Ōtani University, and as president of the Eastern Buddhist Society (founded by D. T. Suzuki), of the International Institute for Japan Studies (at the Christian Kanseigakuin University in Nishinomiya), and of the Conference on Religion in Modern Society (CORMOS).²⁷

In his own account of his philosophical starting point, Nishitani has written:

Before I began my philosophical training as a disciple of Nishida, I was most attracted by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, Emerson and Carlyle, and also by the

Bible and St. Francis of Assisi. Among things Japanese, I liked best Sōseki Natsume and books like the Buddhist talks of Hakuin and Takuan. Through all these many interests, one fundamental concern was constantly at work, I think. . . . In the center of that whirlpool lurked a doubt about the very existence of the self, something like the Buddhist "Great Doubt." So it was that soon I started paying attention to Zen.²⁸

These words give us a good idea of the intellectual vectors coming together in Nishitani's thought. To them we might add the influence of Schelling, whose work on *The Essence of Human Freedom* he later translated into Japanese, of the existentialist philosophers, especially Heidegger with whom he studied in Freiburg from 1936 to 1939, and of a lifelong interest in the German mystics, particularly Meister Eckhart.

In another biographical essay he speaks still more poignantly of the birth of his philosophy:

My life as a young man can be described in a single phrase: it was a period absolutely without hope. . . . My life at the time lay entirely in the grips of nihilism and despair. . . . My decision, then, to study philosophy was in fact—melodramatic as it might sound—a matter of life and death. . . . In the little history of my soul, this decision meant a kind of conversion.²⁹

The nihilism that we see here will remain at the very core of Nishitani's philosophical endeavors. This explains further why Marxism—or any philosophy (or theology, for that matter) that stresses outer events to the neglect of Existenz—was never able to tempt him:

It was inconceivable that this could ever solve my problem. That a materialistic philosophy cannot answer the problems of the soul is clear to me from my own experience. For me there is no way to doubt that the problems of the soul are the fundamental ones for man.³⁰

It was at that critical moment that Nishitani encountered Nishida and Zen, the two forces he was to identify with most, though never to the point of surrendering his own individuality. Indeed, they helped him to get back in touch with himself and freed him to tackle the great spiritual problems of his time. There are numerous references in his works to the relationship between Zen and philosophy, especially as regards his own life. I restrict myself here to two short but revealing passages:

We consider it necessary for our philosophical inquiry to maintain a fundamental religious attitude that accords with the spirit of free and critical thought of philosophy. Since Zen has no dogmatics, and wishes to have none, it is easy to understand why many of us keep rooted in the experience of Zen practice.³¹

And in the final essay of this book, after noting that it is the "original countenance of reality" that he is interested in pursuing, free of all religious and philosophical preconceptions, he goes on:

If I have frequently had occasion to deal with the standpoints of Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, the fundamental reason is that this original countenance seems to me to appear there most plainly and unmistakably.³²

Appropos of the same relationship in Nishida's work, Schininger notes suggestively: "Judging by all that has been said about Zen, everything depends on whether or not one can bring about a revelation of the essence of being in one's own existence."³³

Waldenfels helps us here to put Nishitani's philosophy in the right perspective:

For Nishitani it is a question of a fundamental religious option that he sees our historical situation grounded in a realm beyond space and time, a realm which is proclaimed in the mystical experiences of all times and in the basic Buddhist standpoint of emptiness. Nishitani's intention is to direct our modern dilemma to a solution through the basic notion of emptiness.³⁴

We could go on lining up quotation after quotation from Nishitani in the same vein, but they all leave no doubt as to where Nishitani wants to locate the fundamental problem of our times: it is nihilism, and its alliance with scientism, that is undermining the very foundations of Western civilization, leaving man with no place to stand as man.

This constant preoccupation with nihilism also determines Nishitani's place within the Kyoto School. In one of his autobiographical passages, he remarks that the interest in Marxism and in the problems of scientific rationalism was already present in Nishida and Tanabe. His own inclinations led him elsewhere:

It seemed to me that the problem of modern nihilism in Nietzsche and others was profoundly connected with all these matters. I am convinced that the problem of nihilism lies at the root of the mutual aversion of religion and science. And it was this that gave my philosophical engagement its starting point from which it grew larger and larger until it came to envelop nearly everything.³⁵

In this way Nishitani came to see the conquest of nihilism as *the* task for himself as well as for contemporary philosophy and for future world culture in general. Once he had found his standpoint in Nishida's Eastern nothingness, his philosophy could take its basic orientation: nihility, or relative nothingness, can only be overcome by a radicalization of that nothingness, namely, by a "conversion" to absolute nothingness.

In all of this, we should not overlook the delicate balance of East and West, of Buddhism and Christianity which is present in Nishitani's vision. On the one hand, the true view of reality and the only hope for the global culture of the future is to be found (or at the very least strongly prefigured) in the Eastern heritage. While Nishida presents his idea of absolute nothingness as much as possible in continuity with Western ideas, Nishitani calls it by its Buddhist name, *śūnyatā*, and takes pains to show how in the East, too, the real idea of emptiness was born out of the conquest of the nihility at the ground of the human condition. On the other hand, the current dynamics of history seem to lean rather in the direction of the West. It is there that nihilism appears as the fundamental historical direction of an entire culture. Through the loss of God, its "absolute center," this affirmative-oriented culture of being has fallen into an abyss of nihility. From there it can never save itself through a simple return to affirmation, but "the negative direction must be pursued to its very end . . . where the negative converges, so to speak, with the positive."³⁶ Still, the West must do this, as it were, by its own dynamism, through a return to the ground of its own traditions. Put crudely and in its bare essentials, the question for Nishitani comes down to this: the West has nowhere to go but in the direction of the Eastern (Buddhist) ideal, but it cannot do so except from its own Western (Christian) premises.

Such is Nishitani's challenge to Western thought and to Western religion. The dilemmas of present-day culture are born out of Christianity and cannot be overcome without reference to Christianity. And yet in its present form Christianity is not suited to solving these problems. In order to rise to the task it has to break free of its Western provincialism, to reassess its appreciation of its own values and reorient itself according to a deeper appreciation of the fundamental values of Buddhism. Only in this way can Christianity become a standpoint of true affirmation, able to embrace and to overcome the negations it has engendered.

It bears repeating here that Nishitani sees his philosophy of emptiness, and Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, as radically positive. On this point he finds a convergence of his philosophy with the "original, pre-Buddhist, worldly nature" of Japanese culture. The question frequently arises from the outside whether Buddhism with its world-negating ways is not alien to the native Japanese religiosity as we find it expressed, for instance, in the Shinto celebration of life. If so, this would mean that the Buddhist inspiration of the Kyoto School is

betraying the Japanese experience rather than honoring it. Nishitani is well aware of these questions, so much so that they can be said to flow through his writings like a steady undercurrent. Nowhere is the point stressed more forcefully than in the present book that the field of emptiness, while resulting from an absolute negation, forms the basis of an absolutely positive cultural attitude. Indeed the absoluteness of each immediately present individual thing cut off from all conditionings and relativizing elements, and the freedom and creativity of the self totally open to an infinite universality on the field of emptiness, are exalted here in almost lyrical terms.

We may round off this brief look at Nishitani's thought with two concluding remarks. First, let us return to the relationship between the thought of Nishitani and that of his master, Nishida. Nishida's works show him coming back again and again to the same struggle with finding, in concrete confrontation with Western philosophical systems, a logical expression for his initial Zen intuition of "pure experience," culminating in his talk of absolute nothingness. Nishitani takes up from there to concentrate on the fundamental problem of nihilism and on the two forces that can be looked to for its solution, Buddhism and Christianity. Most of the themes elaborated in the following pages—the search for truly real reality, the progression from being through relative nothingness to absolute nothingness (where the unity of nothingness and being is achieved), the relationship between world and individual, the identity of self and other, the motif of the *intimior intimo meo*, and so on—can be traced back to Nishida. But while the "volitional process" is central to many of Nishida's works and intuition is granted validity only in the context of praxis, Nishitani's thought seems to show a clearer orientation to contemplation within which the will appears as a disruptive and distorting element.

Second, a word about Nishitani's conception of history. From within the Kyoto School, the treatment of history in the final two essays has been received as the strongest and most original part of the book.³⁷ For the Western reader, on the other hand, these chapters may well be the hardest to digest. If it is in general the case that Nishitani offends our sensitivities with regard to reality and thereby sets us reflecting on our own presuppositions, this is particularly true here, where our view of history seems to be systematically dismantled before our very eyes, stone by stone. History, as a process that comes from somewhere (its beginning) and goes somewhere (its end); the unique position of cultural man as builder of history through the objectification of his actions; the