

NISHITANI KEIJI

Essays and
Reflections

1

edited by

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CHISOKUDŌ

*To Yata Keiko
for her many kindnesses
and with fond memories of her father*

矢田敏子さまに
感謝を込めて
斯一步ならぬ一步を

Contents (vol. 1)

Introduction *vii*

MEMOIRS – INTERVIEWS

- The Days of My Youth [1949] 3
The Starting Point of My Philosophy [1963] 13
Remembering Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki [1975] 25
Nishida Kitarō's Character [1977] 39
The Way to Awakening: An Interview [1985] 49
Walking on the Waves: An Interview [1986] 61
Zen Discipleship: An Interview [1986] 73

BUDDHISM

- The Awakening of Self in Buddhism [1957] 93
Three Worlds–No Dharma: Where to Seek
the Mind? [1986] 105
The Problem of Time in Shinran [1958] 115
Religious-Philosophical Existence in Buddhism [1960] 133

ZEN

- Zen and the Modern World [1983] 155
The Standpoint of Zen [1967] 165
The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism [1961] 197
Zen and the Problem of Language [1972] 215
The Problem of *Anjin* in Zen [1968] 231
The Significance of Zen in Modern Society [1975] 263
Chinese Zen: A Dialogue [1974] 271

JAPAN AND THE MODERN WORLD

Japan in the World [1964]	309
Japan in the Contemporary World [1968]	317
On Modernization and Tradition in Japan [1962]	325
The Contemporary Era as a Turning Point in World History [1941]	353
Concerning the Worldview of the New Japan [1941]	361
The Nation and Religion [1941]	373
Bibliography	389
Index	393

Introduction

Nishitani Keiji is one of the most provocative philosophers of the twentieth century. The standpoint of *śūnyatā*, or “emptiness,” laid out in his masterpiece, *Religion and Nothingness*, has captured the attention of a global audience for the task that it set for itself: to think through the inner human demand for religion. At a time when large parts of western academia in Europe and the Americas had come to consider religious ideas and practice unthinkable except in terms of their ideological, psychological, and sociological functions, or to dismiss them as parochial language games or some other common denominators useful for comparative analysis, Nishitani claimed that it was not only possible but *necessary* to think about the meaning of religion *per se*. His efforts to keep religion on the philosophical agenda have proven opportune. Today, more than half a century on, the question posed by the original Japanese title of his book—*What is Religion?*—continues to clamor for the attention Nishitani sought.

Nishitani also played an enormous part in securing the intellectual history of Japan a place on the world philosophical forum. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, UNESCO began publishing journals and books to promote dialogue among cultures. In the area of philosophy and religions, grants were awarded to the Japanese government to issue English translations of important works, some of which took decades to appear in print. They include works of Nishitani’s mentors and senior colleagues, such as Nishida Kitarō’s *A Study of the Good* (1960), Watsuji Tetsurō’s *A Climate* (1961), D. T. Suzuki’s *Japanese Spirituality* (1972), and Tanabe Hajime’s *Philosophy as Meta-noetics* (1986). It was against this backdrop that the journal *Religious*

Studies in Japan was launched in 1959. Its inaugural issue included an essay by Nishitani on “The Problem of Myth,” the first of his writings to appear in English. The journal immediately shuttered but was succeeded in the following year by *Contemporary Religions in Japan*, whose first issue also featured an essay by Nishitani on “The Religious Situation in Present-Day Japan.”

A few years later Nishitani teamed up with Kuyama Yasushi, the Christian philosopher and theologian, to form the International Institute for Japan Studies. As its first president, Nishitani composed a “rationale” for the first issue of its English-language journal *Japan Studies* in 1964. From that time forward, translations of his work into English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian, and Spanish, as well as Chinese and Korean, have pushed forward steadily and the impact of his ideas ripples beneath their oars in ever wider circles.

Of course, Nishitani’s place in the history of ideas will depend on how later generations assess his philosophical writings. In this regard, his unusually prolific output, most of it gathered in the twenty-six volumes of his *Collected Writings*, presents an obstacle to those who do not have linguistic access to the original texts. On this front, readers of English have benefited from the labors of scholars over the past decades to make Nishitani’s writings more widely accessible. They include the following six book-length translations:

Religion and Nothingness. Trans. by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). [NKC 10: 3–319]

The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism. Trans. by Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990). [NKC 8: 3–290]

Nishida Kitarō: The Man and His Thought. Trans. by J. W. Heisig and Yamamoto Seisaku (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; reissued at Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2016). [NKC 9: 5–327]

On Buddhism. Trans. by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006). [NKC 17: 182–228]

Overcoming Modernity: Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan. Trans. and ed. by Richard Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press,

2008). This volume contains Nishitani's interventions in the Symposium on "Overcoming Modernity."

The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji 1900–1990: Lectures on Religion and Modernity. Trans. by Jonathan Morris Augustine and Yamamoto Seisaku (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012). [NKC 16]

In addition to these works, there is a considerable corpus of translations scattered across journals and proceedings or tucked away in scholarly appendixes and collections. These include a number of addresses either published originally in English or revised for English readership, as well as talks, interviews, and roundtables whose translations have preceded the transcription and publication of their Japanese originals. The two volumes of this anthology have attempted to gather all of this material together in order to present a fuller picture of Nishitani's thinking.

The material contained here spans five decades of Nishitani's writings, the earliest being "Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Meister Eckhart," which Nishitani completed in 1938 during his research stay in Freiberg; and the latest, "The Divine in the Contemporary World," a conversation recorded at Nishitani's home on March 18, 1988. Mirroring the history of Nishitani's reception outside of Japan, the bulk of these two volumes belongs to his postwar output, but the diversity of style and theme reflects enduring issues in his thought. A few remarks to the point seem in order here.

Jan Van Bragt, the translator of *Religion and Nothingness*, who stands among Nishitani's English translators as both pioneer and paragon, addressed the question of style directly. In 1966, five years after the work's original publication in Japanese and while studying under Takeuchi Yoshinori, Nishitani's successor in the Department of Religion at Kyoto University, Van Bragt was asked to pen some initial reactions to the book.¹ Shortly thereafter he was approached to collaborate on an English translation of the work, which is an instructive

1. See VAN BRAGT 1996. A more balanced assessment, which may serve as a helpful

tale all its own.² Having spent well over a decade on the text, with the completed book before him, Van Bragt draws our attention to something in Nishitani's style that may prove helpful for readers of these pages, what he calls, the philosopher's "spiral repetitiveness."³ Speaking in the idiom of the time, the translator attributed this to an Eastern aversion to directness or a distinctly Japanese philosophical style. In evidence, he cites commentaries on Nishitani's teacher, Nishida Kitarō. With the benefit of hindsight, these indirect references of Van Bragt's magnify our perspective on the question of style.

Nishitani valued his mentor's sense for "positivity,"⁴ and indeed, it was this very "positive spirit" that attracted Nishitani to Aristotle.⁵ His appreciation for the role of experimentation in the composition of a philosophical *essay* affected his writing style. Rather than shore up arguments to defend a predefined position or explicitly articulated thesis, he preferred to lay out the problem first, recognizing that the deepest questions of philosophy are unlikely to afford once-and-for-all solutions. On the contrary, he was convinced that without trial and experimentation, without constant reflection, revision, and reformulation, the heart of the matter at hand too often remained elusive. This is not to say that Nishitani's "spiral repetitiveness" does not also reflect something particular to Japan, but part of that particularity lay in the fact that the country was up against the enthusiasms of nineteenth-century positivism. What is more, he was writing at a uniquely creative moment in Kyoto academia, where the philosophical imagination was permitted considerable leeway to spiral and backtrack in the course of presenting one's arguments.⁶

preface to the essays collected here, was prepared by the author for a 1992 memorial issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* and reprinted in Van Bragt 2014.

2. See VAN BRAGT 2019.

3. VAN BRAGT 1981, xl-xli.

4. NKC 9: 128–9; NISHITANI 2016, 106 (実証性, rendered there as "facticity").

5. NKC 5: v.

6. We may recall that Nishitani came of age as a thinker and writer at a time of increas-

Nishitani's eagerness for positivity is also evident in the substance of his arguments. Many of the writings collected here crystallize his suspicions about unquestioned faith in the authority of the positive sciences. We might say that the philosophical essay was Nishitani's way of passing the warm breath of reason over the frozen certitudes of modernity so that they might flow again freely. With regard to the development of Nishitani's thought, we see a distinctive shift from early concern with the problem of evil to the issue for which he is best known abroad: his struggles with nihilism. His treatment of nihility and anxiety in the 1941 essay "The Nation and Religion" place the crux of Nishitani's diagnosis of the age and set a course for his thinking in the years ahead.

A subtler concern in Nishitani's early thought that would come into clearer relief in later years was the meaning and role of the imagination. As early as 1926, Nishitani began his investigations into the imagination with Kant and in 1935 followed this with a brilliant study of the imagination in Aristotle. In a 1956 piece referred to above, "The Problem of Myth," he returned to the question in the context of overcoming "the mutual destruction of foundations taking place between science and religion." In 1982 he published "Emptiness and Sameness," a comprehensive attempt to draw together a lifetime of reflection on the imagination and its place in confronting the challenges of modern life. Here again, he reiterates the power of the "positive spirit" and regeneration from its source in imaginative insight.

In compiling the material for these volumes, it was not our intention as editors to redo any of the translations, except to touch up obvious errors of grammar or usage and to remove traces of gender insensitivity. In some cases it was necessary to consult the original Japanese, but in general we worked within the ordinary confines of copyeditors.

ingly brutal state censorship, when the freedom of *style* that pervaded philosophical circles was not extended to *content*.

At the same time, we made every effort to contact the original translators and incorporate any changes they saw fit to make.

Because the translations were intended in the first place for readers unacquainted with Japanese, we moved Chinese and Japanese glyphs to the notes and Indexes, and replaced them with corresponding transliterations in the body of the text. Uniform conventions were also applied to the formatting of the notes, the use of diacritical marks in Sanskrit terms, the conversion of Chinese names and words to pinyin, and the rendering of titles of classical works. Each entry opens with a brief prefatory remark together with a history of its publication. The dates indicated in the table of contents denote the year of initial publication or, in the case of lectures and dialogues, the year in which they took place.

Readers will no doubt notice that the literary quality of the contributions varies greatly. At times, the prose may read unnatural or unpolished. For the most part, we allowed the texts to stand in their previously published form. In a few cases, all of them clearly indicated, this was not possible, and a heavy editing and rewriting was called for to make the meaning clear and linguistically acceptable.

The task of reviewing more than seven hundred pages of material was staggering, but very little compared to the combined time and effort that went into the work of the translators themselves. We add our names to theirs in the hope that our labors will have helped the thought of Nishitani Keiji reach new readers and inspire still greater attention.

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