

NISHITANI KEIJI

Essays and
Reflections

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edited by

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CHISOKUDŌ

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Encounter with Emptiness

In the spring of 1984, Smith and Amherst Colleges, inspired by the publication of Religion and Nothingness and under the direction of Taitetsu Unno, organized an international conference on Nishitani's thought. The event brought together a number of theological and buddhological luminaries and was instrumental in making Nishitani more widely known in Western academia. Since he himself was not able to attend due to the illness of his wife, he penned a brief opening address which is reproduced here.

The address was published in Taitetsu Unno, ed., *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji: The Encounter with Emptiness* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989; later reissued at Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2019), 1–4.

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Let me begin by saying how very honored I feel at your taking up my book, *Religion and Nothingness*, for discussion, and even making it the theme of your symposium.

I badly wanted to be present among you and profit by your comments and criticisms but, unfortunately, my wife had to enter the hospital some time ago and is not allowed to leave there yet. Believe me, this is the only thing that keeps me from being with you as I would love to be.

For this I offer my sincere apologies. Especially to the organizers of the symposium, Professors Unno and Thurman, I want to express how sorry I am that I kept them waiting for my decision until the last moment. But the fact is that my wife's illness made necessary a second operation and a stay in the hospital that was protracted from week to week. I am happy to say that now everything seems to develop in the right direction and that in one more month my wife will be able to come home.

Already more than ten years ago, I had the privilege of teaching courses in your country on three separate occasions. All three experiences were very pleasant and left a deep impression on me, so that I certainly want to visit your country once more, provided that my domestic circumstances permit it.



My book in English translation, *Religion and Nothingness*, has the concept of nothingness as its central theme and problem. One could treat nothingness from various angles, but my central concern has been to *think* the problem of nothingness. In other words, to approach it as a problem of philosophy.

When I say "philosophy," for a person such as myself, born and

living in Japan, I first of all mean Western philosophy, since this is the most influential one. It is, therefore, only natural that, in trying to make a fresh investigation into the problems connected with Oriental nothingness, I take my clues from the various themes of contemporary Western philosophy.

We, Japanese, today undergo the influence of Occidental culture in every aspect of our lives: in politics, economics, and all aspects of culture. Even religion and ethics are no exception. Contemporary Japanese culture is thus also influenced by Western culture. In my view, we can feel happy about this fact.

At the same time, however, in my country there lives the long history of Eastern culture: the historical tradition that spread over India, China, and Japan; and in our hearts the spirit fostered in that Eastern culture exists as a living tradition. Consequently, we are faced with the ineluctable necessity of re-thinking once more Oriental thought and philosophy with the help of what we learned from Western philosophy.

Therefore, a fundamental reflection on our historical and cultural legacy becomes a necessary task. In doing so, the first thought that immediately arises is the importance of sticking closely to everyday life and the problems that arise from that experience, that is, to deal with the problems contained in daily living, and to seek the solution through a thoroughgoing intuition (*naikan*).¹ This may be the characteristic of Eastern thought and philosophy: identifying with the problems of ordinary life, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, and solving them through thinking.

As an example, let me evoke a reminiscence of my younger days. It happened while staying in a hotel during a trip I once made. Watching the sun rise from the balcony, I was suddenly struck by a powerful feeling. The light of the morning sun formed a golden thread and jumped up, like a serpent as it were, to where I was standing. While being bathed in the brightness of the sun's ray, I really felt that I was

1. 内観.

truly seeing the sun. The overwhelming experience was that the radiance of the sun was focused on me and that the world was opening brightly, concentrated on myself alone.

Although in a very elemental form, it was clear to me that the world is a place open to all things to realize themselves as they truly are. At the same time the openness of emptiness includes the fact that I see, hear, and know things as they are.

It could be said that the whole is myself, but it should not be misunderstood. Supposing that on the next balcony someone else was likewise watching the sunrise. He too could have felt the same way: the sun is mine alone, the totality is myself.

The implication here is that our daily experiences of seeing and hearing contain infinite possibilities. For the same shock of surprise can be experienced not only at the sight of the sun, but also at seeing a flower or hearing a sound. The question is: What is the real “face” of our commonplace experiences of daily life? In Buddhism thoroughgoing *naikan* is considered to be extremely important; and seeing, hearing, perceiving is said to be the true path into Buddhism. In Zen this point is driven home most radically, and it is precisely this which is intuited when we speak of nothingness or emptiness.

Nothingness or emptiness is “not having a single thing” (*muichimotsu*²) and this is tackled directly by the Zen *kōan*. The first *kōan* given in Zen practice deal with emptiness. For example, we have the following: “To take up the spade empty-handed; to ride the buffalo while walking.” This saying treats emptiness in the light of the daily toil of farmers working in their field.

When the spade, the work, and the worker are one, there is no spade, no work, and no worker. This is the realization of emptiness; this is what is meant by the empty-hand. It is the same when the farmer goes on his way with his buffalo to till the rice paddies; if the farmer and buffalo have become one, the farmer may in fact be walking, but

2. 無一物.

that is no different from straddling the buffalo. The farmer is walking while sitting on the buffalo, step by step. This means that the universe is in its totality manifested as water buffalo.

Likewise, instead of rice paddies, when we walk on the city streets, or swim in the ocean, it is the same thing. Whether we labor with our hands, or walk with our feet, it is the unity of the static and dynamic.

I believe that herein resides the fundamental spirit of Eastern culture. And what one can take in hand while remaining empty-handed is certainly not only the spade, but equally the pen when writing, or the cigarette when smoking, or the wheel when driving. Therein always appears immediate reality in everyday life, and precisely this is the ultimate reality for Eastern thinking. In other words, true reality is encountered while staying in the midst of the everyday and returning ever more deeply into its depth and inner recesses. Even the great problem of life-and-death (*samsāra*) is clarified thereby, and what is called “faith” in Buddhism implies this kind of experiencing.

Daily life is the basic problem and the last key to all problems. That is the standpoint of Zen and, more generally, the core of the Buddhist standpoint. To think that standpoint by way of philosophy is my basic concern. What does it mean to think in this philosophy of daily life? Let me give you an example.

When a monk was sitting in zazen, his teacher asked him, “What are you doing?” “I am thinking about non-thinking,” said the monk. This dialogue is often quoted by Dōgen, the famous Zen thinker. This basic “non-thinking” is the same as being “empty-handed.”

I am thinking of making philosophy work as the thinking of basic non-thinking, just like the everyday labor of working the field and pulling the weeds in the mode of “taking the spade in the hand while staying empty-handed,” directly revealing absolute nothingness. From such a standpoint I wish to clarify the many problems of our day.

I want to end this short message by asking for your straightforward criticism, and thanking every one of you for taking part in this conference and showing interest in my work.