



On Buddhism

KEIJI NISHITANI

TRANSLATED BY SEISAKU YAMAMOTO
AND ROBERT E. CARTER

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT E. CARTER

FOREWORD BY JAN VAN BRAGT

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FOREWORD

In these pages the reader will find a representative sample of the thinking of the older Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), the foremost Japanese philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century.

The thought of Nishitani when he was a younger man has become rather well known in the West (especially in America)—at least in the circles of the philosophy of religion and of the ongoing Buddhist-Christian dialogue—through the following English translations of some of his major works:

Religion and Nothingness. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982. (Originally published in 1961.)

The Self-overcoming of Nihilism. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. (Originally published in 1941.)

Nishida Kitarō. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. (Originally published in 1980, but collecting material from 1936 to 1968.)

The present translation introduces a rather different Nishitani, and it may very well be that the main interest for the reader will lie precisely in these differences, which can be summarized as follows. First of all, we are offered here translations not of written and well-structured works, but of records of lectures given by Nishitani to mixed audiences. We are thus making acquaintance with Nishitani's spoken style, with all of its idiosyncrasies: frequent repetitions, a circular rather than a straight-line approach to the subject matter, and a marked tendency to digressions. If these idiosyncrasies—which are rather representative of most Japanese texts—sometimes irritate us a bit, we may find some consolation in the fact that these texts are much easier to

read than the earlier translated works, which are mostly written in a fairly involved style.

Secondly, rather than directly tackling philosophical problems, the present texts present philosophical reflections on Buddhism, especially on Japanese Buddhism in its present-day situation. Knowing that Nishitani himself was, after all, a Buddhist and a practitioner of Zen, the reader may be astonished by the sharpness of the critique of Buddhism found in these pages. To cite an example: "At present Buddhism exerts practically no influence on life in society. . . . That is due to the fact that Buddhism has merged too closely into the social life, has turned into social habit, and has fallen into a state of inertia."¹

This criticism, however, should not induce us into drawing the wrong conclusions. Nishitani certainly loved and appreciated Buddhism, especially for its power to overcome the natural self-centeredness of the human being. But this love and appreciation, far from blunting his critical spirit, rather honed it to an ever sharper edge. His criticisms are clearly intended to whip the stagnant Buddhism of his day into new life.

Thirdly, while the earlier translated works all belong to an earlier period in Nishitani's life (say, the period up to the publication of his most systematic work, *Religion and Nothingness*, 1961), the present texts belong to a later period (1975–79), when Nishitani, after retiring from Kyoto University in 1963, had already retired a second time, this time from the Buddhist Otani University (1971), but was still lecturing there. We are thus confronted with the question: can we detect in the thought of the "later Nishitani" a real evolution beyond the thought of *Religion and Nothingness*? I am inclined to answer this question in the affirmative and thereby feel bound to somehow define or characterize this difference. The scholar who first drew my attention to this evolution, Shōtō Hasa, describes the difference in the following way: "Here, alongside emptiness, one finds another major pattern of transcendence—namely, 'transcendence in the earth' . . . a transcendence finding form in what he called the Buddha Realm (*bukkokudo*), the Pure Land (*jōdo*), and also the Kingdom of God."² In my own words, I would tentatively say that Nishitani now pays special attention to aspects of reality to which he had not allotted full weight in his earlier system: the dark, nondiaphanous sides of human existence in its connection with the body and the earth. With regard to religion, he is now more inclined to recognize the right of these particular forms that have to do with the body and its link to the earth. And as to the human person, we may be struck by the heavy stress he now puts on the strictly individual conscience, that part of the self that is not accessible to others

("A closed chamber where others cannot look"), but is the place of a direct relationship with oneself, the place of an independence of the self that is needed for its trustworthiness and ethical responsibility. Whereas in the earlier system the whole stress lay on the individual as nonego, he now speaks of the human person as an independent "subjectivity that has at the same time a nonself nature," a "nonego-like subjectivity."

Among the elements that have evidently prompted Nishitani to this rethinking in his later years, we may mention the experience of the rejection of some basic ethical requirements by some factions of the student revolt of the 1970s and the Buddhist environment he found at Otani University, which led him to a greater openness to the symbolism or "imaging" at work in Pure Land Buddhism (and in Christianity).

Jan Van Bragt
Kyoto, Japan

Notes

1. *Nishitani keiji chosakushū* [Keiji Nishitani's Collected Works], vol. 18 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1990), p. 79.
2. Shōtō Hase, "Emptiness, Thought and the Concept of the Pure Land in Nishitani," *Zen Buddhism Today*, no. 14 (1997): 66.

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INTRODUCTION

Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) is generally considered to have been one of the three central figures in the now famous Kyoto school, and one of Japan's most important and creative philosophers of religion. A student of Kitarō Nishida, the “founder” of the Kyoto school, Nishitani spent two years in Germany on a scholarship from the Ministry of Education. There he was able to consult with Martin Heidegger. The breadth and depth of his scholarship are abundantly evident in his *Religion and Nothingness*, a classic in modern cross-cultural philosophical inquiry, and possibly one of the more important books of the twentieth century in the philosophy of religion. As a teacher, he inspired many with his unflagging energy and the breadth and depth of his scholarship. As a man, he was generous with his time, and remarkably open-hearted and sensitive to the needs and projects of others. He delivered these six lectures to the Shin Buddhist Association of the Great Earth in Kyoto Japan.¹ The first two lectures, which attempt to lay out the problem of modernism and its effects on traditional values, were given in 1971, the second two in 1972, and the final two in 1974.

The general theme of these lectures is the depiction of the essential features of the modern age, both in Japan and in the West, and its effect on some of the essential structures of Buddhist and Japanese culture. His conviction is that modernism, which is so closely tied to the rise of science and technology, is simply unable to sustain the quality and centrality of human relationships. Nishitani emphasizes that interpersonal relationships are at the very heart of Japanese Buddhist thought and practice, and that the view of relationships arising out of Western individualism, materialism, and contractual ethics is simply insufficient as a basis for genuine authentic human relationships. His thesis is that genuine human relationships must be established on the basis of a more traditional religious or spiritual understanding. By

definition, then, atheistic materialism is unable to place the individual in the wider context of the universe as a divine place and creative source. His vision of the nature of this underlying creative source of all things is both an attempt to retain what remains of value in the tradition and an attempt to adapt it to the needs and challenges of the modern and postmodern world. At the center of this interpretation is the notion of conscience, which he takes to be the quiet bidding within each of us that impels us to reach beyond the shrunken sense of reality as lifeless and material, to an encounter with the fullness of reality within our very depths. The divine as Buddha-nature is within us, and is the aboriginal ground or source of that which is lasting in tradition; from it arises our urge to finish what is yet unfinished: to flesh out what is in the modern age atrophied and generally unheard because of the louder noises of mechanization, individual success, and material rewards. Of course, for a Buddhist, what aboriginally exists as one's Buddha-nature is never to be thought of as a soul-like entity. Rather, it should be thought of as a potentiality, a hidden capacity for realizing Buddhahood. If one is able to undergo the radical transformation that eliminates the delusions of ego, soul, and ordinary understanding, then one will come to *act* as a Buddha would act. To so act is to have realized one's Buddha-nature.

As an overview, Jan Van Bragt summarizes Nishitani's position as follows: "It is Nishitani's conviction that Japanese traditional culture, and especially its Mahāyāna Buddhist component, carries the necessary elements for a solution to the modern problems not only of Japanese society, but also of western culture."²

Religion and the Modern World

The subject matter of these lectures, while simply expressed, is in itself quite complex. Nishitani is concerned with finding a way for Buddhism in particular, and for Japan more generally, to cope with its most recent encounters with Western culture, and especially with modern science and technology, in ways that do not neglect the great traditions of the past. Having come under Heidegger's influence, it is no surprise that he is concerned with the overwhelming power of science and technology, but his approach is distinctive, because he looks for a remedy for the difficulties posed by westernization and modernization in the Buddhist and Japanese cultural traditions of the past. His strategy is not to advocate a return to the past, for he is

adamant that the past is forever frozen and out of reach. Nevertheless, as human beings we carry the past with us in so many ways, and it is our task to breathe new life and significance into tradition, as it is shaped and reshaped by science, technology, and the cultures of the West. He is an advocate of change, but of a change that does not forget to carry its past into the future as an ingredient in the "mix of meaning" that quality living always demands. The authentic person is one who lives in the present with one eye on the past and the other on the future, on hope and possibility. Nishitani believes that what is required of us in the modern and postmodern world is that we simultaneously destroy and rebuild our traditional way of life in the light of the changes brought about by the secular age in which we find ourselves. Yet we must not simply join the secularists who have abandoned religion and much of tradition. They live blindly, being buffeted by the trends and fads of the moment. Moreover, they have accepted an ever present nihilism as the preferred and rational understanding of the truth of the human condition, and in doing so have lost all awareness of a sustaining metaphysical and spiritual background to our impoverished materialistic and nihilistic foreground. Nishitani's emphasis on the nihilism at the root of modernism and its worldview takes much from Nietzsche. It was Nietzsche who warned us that "God is dead," and Nishitani takes this as a warning that any of our gods, religious organizations, and lives may house an unspoken nihilism within. He is calling us to conscience, to authenticity: he demands of us that we review our beliefs in the light of the spirit of the original teachings of our traditions. In this sense, revolutionary thinking is a clarion call to return to the original teaching of the Buddha, or of Christ. Religious organizations must renew their understanding of the enlightenment teachings of their founder, lest they slide into the meaninglessness of empty ritual and recitation, or worse, into actions that are the opposite of what the founder actually demanded. As a snake renews itself by sloughing off the dead skin of its present condition, so must a tradition slough off its no-longer living traditions, and attempt to return to the original meaning and insights of its founder. Revolution is a paradoxical new look at what was, on this reading, rather than a rejection of some unchanging dogma. It is the dogma that has veered from the originary insight over the years, and now a nihilism of unengaged and uninspired followers is the result. Nishitani's understanding is that a reformer calls his people to conscience, like an Old Testament prophet, reminding them of truths only dimly remembered, if at all, and he points out their headlong

rush toward the abyss of disbelief and immorality. They have lost their way, and the fastest and surest way to find it is to return to the sources of the tradition, even if not to the historical tradition itself.

Thus, it is incumbent upon religious people to step "outside" of their religious perspective, to step firmly into the modern, secular, technologically drenched age in which we do in fact find ourselves. At the same time, we must reconstruct the meaning and insight of the "inside" of our religious traditions, making them relevant to the modern age by transforming them in the light of this encounter with secularism and technology. However, this reappropriation of tradition demands that we untie the rigid knots encasing tradition.

Nishitani introduces the Japanese word *kata* to indicate that which points us toward a meaningful and appropriate way of living our lives. It is a map for action, a pattern, form, or structure for appropriate living. We must continually reconstruct our *kata* by first grasping its traditional sense and function, and then adapt it to meet and fit our new existential circumstances. Reconstruction requires, first, that we come back to origins. We need to understand once again how it is that we are to live our lives, based on religion as tradition has handed it on; and then we need to reconstruct that meaning in the light of the circumstances and conditions of our greatly changed age. And this process must continue without end. We are always reappropriating our past in the light of the present, with the hope of a more meaningful future. Nishitani refers to this as a "forward and backward movement," from tradition to technology in our age, and then from technology back to tradition in our attempt to enliven our technologically deadened world, and to loosen the rigidities of tradition at the same time. It is the establishing together of a conservative and a liberal approach to the past, and to the present and future: we must understand and preserve the past, but only in order to transform it and to rebuild from its ashes a new blend of tradition and modernism. And we must preserve the technological and scientific gains of modernism, while critiquing this secularism by means of a renewed understanding of the power and significance of tradition. It is a simultaneous conserving of tradition and a constant search for new possibilities with which to transform that very tradition.

One of the most apt and insightful images in these essays is that of the kite. It concretizes what has just been said about the importance of tradition in moving forward into a new future, and encountering new circumstances, and yet remaining true to the past. Japan, as a nation, has been buffeted by the strong winds of change; it has moved from feudalism to an age of science and technology in little more than a single generation. According to Nishitani, Japan has undergone such

radical change that almost nothing has remained unchanged. Yet Japan, at least thus far, has been able to adopt and adapt to new influences, while remaining distinctively Japanese. Like a kite, Japan has been able to steer a stable course, because of the "tail" of tradition that has served to stabilize her flight into the winds of change, while being rooted or anchored by the "string" of its deep culture. A kite without the weight of tradition and rootedness simply dances wildly, becoming tangled in tree branches, or is dashed to the ground, or breaks away altogether and loses its way and its distinctive past. What here made Japan a country able to adapt to its own high-level modernization are its deep-rooted traditions. The result has been a more balanced and stable form of progress. As Nishitani explains, "[W]hen a strong wind blows, the power of tradition must be put to work. But . . . we cannot fly a kite if its tail is too heavy. It is of the utmost importance to strike a balance between these two inclinations; toward modernization and change, and toward tradition" (p. 36).

Buddhism, on the other hand, is like a kite caught in a tree, away from the winds of change. Isolated from secularization and modernization, technology and science, religion generally has been sealed away from change, leaving a huge gap between secular society and religion. The "inside" of religion has had little to do with the "outside," the secular world. And the secular world has been increasingly uninterested in religion. A central theme of these lectures is finding a way to bridge the gap, and to make religion, and Buddhism in particular, relevant to the modern world.

If religion has become isolated from the modern world, the modern world has become increasingly westernized and technologized. This way of thinking, Nishitani warns, powerful as it may be, is riddled with a sense of its own meaninglessness. It leads to the abyss of nihilism. We conceal from ourselves the abyss of nihilism and meaninglessness that Nishitani thinks is the inevitable outcome of a secularized and mechanized world, for it is both a dehumanizing force and a cutting off of the metaphysical roots that chart a path out of nihilistic despair. What we need is a pathway that leads us toward a perspective of interconnectedness with each other, the world of nature, and our ultimate source. It is his hope that the East may be able to contribute a new way of thinking, arising out of its own distinctive ways of being in the world, to allow us to confront technology in a way that will humanize technology, rather than have technology dehumanize humankind. The "premodern" may help, like the tail of a kite, to give birth to a new "post-postmodernism." But to do so, we must reappropriate the "inside" meaning of religious tradition so that from it we can find our way toward a perceiving of the worth of the human

person, the intrinsic value of nature, and the sustaining power of our source.

Shin (Pure Land) Buddhism

As with Heidegger's "fourfold," Nishitani imagines us as mortals, *in*, rather than observing, our natural environment, envisioning the sky of ideals and possibilities, while acknowledging the "other power" that is the ultimate creative source and sustainer of life and physical existence (see pp. 48–50, 98). What is surprising about these lectures is that while Nishitani stands firmly in the Zen Buddhist tradition, these lectures were presented to a Shin Buddhist organization, and he speaks fondly of that tradition. Pure Land Buddhism recognizes our complete dependence on our source. We do not sustain ourselves in existence by our own means, at least not fundamentally, nor did we bring ourselves into existence. Nishitani writes that we "are all allowed to live" (p. 124) by the grace of other-power. Seiki Horen writes, "[I]f there were no compassion toward me from the other-power [*tariki*], my past, present, and future would not exist."³ He goes on to say that there are innumerable powers that protect and guide us: parents, society, nation, air, earth, sun, and, most importantly, Amida Buddha. When reciting *Namu Amida Butsu* (I Take Refuge in Amida Buddha), one needs to be grateful for this divine compassion.

Shinran (1173–1262), a founder of the Shin sect, sought a direct way to gain religious experience, one that did not require an intellectual education or complex rituals. Recitation of the Buddha's name leads directly to such experience, and the resultant "enlightenment" will reveal the existence of a "Pure Land," more traditionally conceived of as a "heaven" somewhere else, but which D.T. Suzuki and Nishitani conceive of as being right-here-now, and underfoot. Suzuki states that the "Pure Land is right here, and those who have eyes can see it around them. And Amida is not presiding over an ethereal paradise, but his Pure Land is this dirty earth itself."⁴ Nishitani expresses a similar view: "[I]t is not that we conceive of it as something fantastically far away from us. It certainly differs absolutely from this impure world. But I hold the view that precisely this absolute difference renders it possible for this pure world to be established here" (p. 88).

Talk of "other-power" and dependence appears to fly in the face of the Zen Buddhist stress on "self-power" with its assumption of the aboriginal existence of one's own Buddha-nature. Pure Land and Zen appear to hold competing doctrines, rather than complementary per-