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THE FORM OF THE FORMLESS: THE HEALING JOURNEY FROM SELF TO NOTHINGNESS

Robert E. Carter

INTRODUCTION

“Nothingness” or “emptiness” is a Buddhist notion, originally termed *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit. “*Śūnyatā* represents an absolutely transcendent field,” writes Nishitani Keiji, “and, at the same time, a field that is not situated on the far side of where we find ourselves, but on our near side, more so than we are with respect to ourselves.”¹ “*Śūnyatā*” is difficult to translate, but it derives from the Sanskrit root “su,” which means, among other things, “to be swollen,” both like a hollow balloon – and, hence, emptiness – and like a pregnant woman. Thus, while *śūnyatā* may be nothing, and empty, it is also pregnant with possibilities. All the while it must be kept firmly in mind that the notion of *śūnyatā* is deconstructive in its force. It is a heuristic notion, and not a cognitive or metaphysical one with an independent and substantial existence. There is no such thing as *śūnyatā* – emptiness – nothingness. *Śūnyatā* is permanently “under erasure.” The notion itself is deployed to help us let go of our concepts, in which case we must let go of the concept of *śūnyatā* as well. It was Nagarjuna who warned us that *śūnyatā* was a snake that, if grasped at the wrong end, could prove fatal; and yet that is what has happened repeatedly in later Buddhism: *śūnyatā* became a “thing”, became reified, and available to representational thinking.

THE JOURNEY

The aim of this exploration into the thought of two twentieth-century philosophers – Martin Heidegger from the West, and Nishida Kitarō from the Far East – is to point out a surprising convergence in thought about how to achieve personal, social, moral, and spiritual health.

The issue is not a biographical one: there is no claim made that either thinker achieved such health, but rather that there are resources in the two cultural perspectives which they presented that point us along a healing path. It is the description of these paths, and their possible convergence, that will be my focus.

Heidegger's account begins with a grave concern: we have lost our sense of the mystery of Being, and our focus is increasingly on technology, and on a conception of things as mere material-at-hand for our mundane (mostly economic) needs. Indeed, we are turning each other into mere "human resources," and are becoming of secondary importance to the institutions and businesses where we toil. Surely that is the "bottom line" in bottom-line thinking.

Heidegger's lament, put in philosophical terms, is that we have become surface readers of, and mere consumers of our world: we have lost our sense of that unspoken and unspeakable Being which underlies everything, and we have come to accept that there are only individual, material beings in our world, and that they are there primarily for our use. The mystery of existence has all but vanished from our consciousness. Few if any still ask what to Heidegger remains the fundamental philosophical question: why is there anything at all, rather than nothing at all? He concludes that we have to let Being speak once more, in its ontological difference.

But what is this mysterious "Being" of which Heidegger speaks? In his superb "A Dialogue on Language,"² Heidegger writes "that emptiness then is the same as nothingness,"³ an insight that cries out for further East-West dialogue and analysis. Indeed, he has the Japanese participant in this imaginary dialogue remark that the Japanese "marvel to this day how the Europeans could lapse into interpreting as nihilistic the nothingness of which you speak ... To us, emptiness is the loftiest name for what you mean to say with the word 'Being'."⁴ In a 1969 symposium on "Heidegger and Eastern Thought" held at the University of Hawaii, Heidegger stated that "again and again it has seemed urgent to me that a dialogue take place with the thinkers of what is to us the Eastern World."⁵

By turning our world into a vast collection of things, of individual beings only, we have become exclusively representational thinkers. Even God has been rendered representational in the theologies of the West. The possible exceptions are the mystical traditions in Western religiosity, but mainstream theology has without question, more often than not, reified God, and along with God, Being itself. God has been necessary to Western metaphysics because God is the very foundation of existence, the first cause as *causa sui*, the "unmoved mover", the ground on which all other existence rests and because of which it is at all. Metaphysics is inescapably ontotheological(and representational), and our languages may be thereby hopelessly tainted as

vehicles evolved to express the assumptions of any common metaphysical outlook, except our own.⁶ In the language of Heidegger's Gelassenheit (translated as the Discourse on Thinking), the things of this world are never accepted for what they are in themselves, but are always analysed, explained and grounded or founded on something else that grants them their existence, their meaning, their purpose or telos, and their value. Yet as for God, Heidegger reflects that the modern thinker "would today rather remain silent about God ... for the ontotheological character of metaphysics has become questionable for thinking..."⁷ The depths of things is no longer apparent, and God and the holy have altogether vanished. Our language, our words, have become idle talk or chatter (language as Gerede), which closes Dasein off from the holy, the world, and even from itself, rendering everything manipulable material-at-hand, unmysterious, self-evident, and self-secure. Language of this kind obscures, leaves much concealed (lethe), and is not at all the means to reveal what already lies before us, but which nonetheless remains concealed from us. Nevertheless, everything which is said through language, as the House of Being, always already silently says what is otherwise unsaid and unsayable. Language says what can be spoken, yet silently indicates what cannot be spoken, at the same time, or at least it does so if we have the ears to hear the unspoken silence, the whisper of the concealed. The point can perhaps be made more concretely as a metaphor, if you will imagine a bamboo pipe, hinged at the end in such a way as to drop down, still attached by its hinge, onto a stone strategically placed beneath it, when a trickle of water has sufficiently accumulated in the hinged, and partially blocked end. The result is a staccato "thock," which punctuates the silence of the garden surround by causing the silence to stand out in its emptiness all the more. In Tetsuaki's words (writing on Heidegger and Zen):

at bottom there opens up another dimension - spontaneous arising - [possibly in Heidegger, Ereigniss, or "the gift"] in which we are all of the same "element." There is no mystery in this state; it is rather that we are facing reality as it is. However, this reality is totally different from reality as ordinarily experienced, since it is perceived without the overlay of everyday language. In the former state, life is experienced as transparently condensed combustion. The moment of combustion is pure silence beyond where language is exhausted. There the primordial reality of the world, which cannot be reached by language, keeps silently boiling up. ... The language of the true self emerges from this silence. It arises from and is nourished by silence to become something, which expresses this silence. ... Spontaneous arising, the genuine state without segmentation or differentiation, the source of all existence, is entirely hidden by ordinary language with its defini-

tions of reality and its segmentation by means of standard constants.⁸

It is this silence which continuously emanates from the unfathomable depths of the indescribable, which is the source of one's own language, and of whatever unconcealment is available to us. To listen one must become silent, and in the very act of silence one may hear silence itself. Heidegger's insight is that we need to become aware of the lack of a word for Being: not that we have not, all too often, given Being a name, but that we need to be open to the profundity of the experience of the "lack" itself. We cannot, and we must not try to name the unnameable: rather, we must recognize and honour the fact that it is the lack itself that is our prime insight. It is healthy to recognize that Being cannot be named, that we need to plunge back into the formless, primordial, originary experience of sheer existence itself. And this is Nishida's starting-point: "pure experience."

NISHIDA'S PROJECT

Nishida's philosophic task was to speak precisely of the unspeakable, or to hint, through language forms, at the formless. In doing so, he adopted a logic of *paradox*, of the simultaneous assertion and denial of "is" and "is not." This logic is Buddhist logic, and it reaches all the way back to the second century display of logical analysis by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna's formula for complete saying (logically speaking) was fourfold: that something "is," and yet "is not," and yet "both is and is not," and yet "neither is nor is not." David Dilworth, in his Postscript to his translation of Nishida's final essay "The Logic of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview" (1945), deftly characterizes this paradoxical logical form:

...paradoxical logic reduces to the basic predicative structure of "is *and yet* is not." We can alternately characterize this as the logic of the simultaneity, and biconditionally, as opposites without their higher synthesis.⁹

What the paradox comes to in religious terms, is that God, the Buddha, or nothingness is absolutely self-contradictory. The absolute is one, and yet returns to itself in the form of the infinite many.¹⁰ The "and yet" formulation requires self-negation, which Nishida refers to as God's emptying himself, i.e. becoming nothing.¹¹ Thus, if the absolute is thought of as a unity, then the absolute as unity must empty itself and ("and yet") be thought of as a plurality. The plurality must also empty itself in return, and so is a many of a unity, i.e. a self-contradictory identity. God is immanent, and yet transcendent; transcendent, and, therefore immanent.¹² Frederick Streng, in his discussion of Nāgārjuna, writes that "a proposition that declares 'emptiness is ...' also means 'emptiness is not....' and vice versa."¹³ Even God must empty himself,

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and become pure or absolute nothingness, and yet even nothingness must empty, becoming neither a transcendent God nor a unity, but an immanence in all being, in the 10,000 things of the world. Again, as immanent in all beings, all beings transcend themselves and are, at base, absolutely nothing. Even the dualism of the above “emptyings” must be overcome, and so it is perhaps more apt to say that it is precisely because the absolute is both a unity and a plurality, that it is also neither: it is; it is not; it both is and is not; and it neither is nor is not. Thus, the analysis of absolute nothingness as a self-contradictory identity ends with the perplexing conclusion that it is “neither x nor not- x .” It is the culmination of the fourfold negation of the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. Yet the contentment is brief, for emptying must begin again even here, for because not x and not not x , therefore x , not x , and both x and not x . *The emptying must continue exactly as long as we persist in attending to the dualism of polar opposition*, which is the stuff of thinking and languaging. The direction of a solution is not to fixate on dualistic conceptualization beyond recognizing its inescapability in the conceptual mode, but to switch one’s attention enough to include the identity that consists of this antinomial flow. This is the second and all-embracing aperture of awareness – identity, or unity – and whether as wisdom, or intuition, or as Nishida’s “active intuition,” it is echoed ubiquitously throughout the East.

One now realizes that one participates in the fundamental unity of the cosmos, of the totality, for at the base or bottom of all things there is the indeterminate, unspeakable, nothingness of ultimate reality. Like a kimono, everything that exists is lined with nothingness. It is not seen, or heard, or touched except insofar as we look through things in the everyday world, which we can see, hear, or touch. Indeed, it is precisely *because* there are touchable, visible, and audible things that we can come to know that of which they are determinate expressions. We see nothingness in the “hang” of the garment, its tailored perfection and elegance, but we should not see the lining directly. But we can detect its presence, or at least we infer it. The double aperture consists in the ability to read the nature of the lining of the kimono from the shape or hang of the kimono-surface; one reads the nature of the formless from the formed. To sense both the foreground and the background lining is to have penetrated to the *identity* of the lining (of all that exists) as it is manifested in the uniquely individualized manifold of being.

THE SAYING AND SILENCE OF LANGUAGE

I have taken Heidegger to be pointing us toward a use of language which is not representational nor calculative, but which frees itself from ontotheological contamination. The background to all metaphysics, language, and thought is not itself representational. Being is an open

question, and must remain for us *always* a question. But this question is background against which – *not the ground on which* – beings stand. We habitually focus on the foreground, and are deaf and blind to the background. Sensitivity to this silence, which is usually drowned out by the foreground noise of traditional representational thinking, and exacerbated by the pace and grindings of the technological age, requires retraining in meditative thinking, in openness to the silence-as-something-more, of gestures, and the subtle nuances of feeling and the multidimensional meanings of poetry. The poet resonates with the richness of that which is beyond words, and which can only be hinted at.¹⁴ Words must go beyond themselves. Poetic words take us beyond representational saying, to *mystery*.¹⁵ Poetic words, poetic thinking is “the giver [of nonrepresentational Being] which itself is never given.”¹⁶ Therefore, it is not just our language or thinking itself that is hopelessly representational, but our metaphysical outlook:

It is just as much a property of language to sound and ring and vibrate, to hover and to tremble, as it is for the spoken words of language to carry a meaning. But our experience of this property is still exceedingly clumsy, because the metaphysical-technological explanation gets in the way everywhere, and keeps us from considering the matter properly.¹⁷

Using words non-ontotheologically “means that the sounding word returns into soundlessness, back to whence it was granted: into the ringing of stillness....”¹⁸ The capacity to comprehend the sounding of words, *and* to see through the words to the unsayable stillness of Being is the double-aperture that I have attributed to Zen and to Nishida. But what I now need to say more about is how this analysis of Being and nothingness constitutes a healing journey.

My starting place will be Heidegger’s essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking.” Here he takes us on an etymological journey in order to demonstrate that the original use of “to build,” includes the meaning “to dwell.” It is a “trace” meaning at best, but it was there in our Western linguistic origins, and was lost sight of altogether. Increasingly we build buildings in which we exist, but do not dwell. Public buildings, schools, universities, airports, train stations, office buildings, hospitals are all places where we work, where we exist, but in which we do not dwell as in a home, or a neighborhood. It is less and less clear that we even dwell in our dwellings. The etymology continues, and it is discovered that “to dwell” includes the meanings “to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, and to cultivate the vine.”¹⁹ There is a great difference between mere building, and cultivating, protecting and preserving. And the point is graphically made with his example of the bridge.

The economist asks how little can we build the bridge for and still meet the minimum re-

quirements of safety, design, and so on. The pragmatist views the bridge as a means of getting across the river in a convenient and timesaving way. The technologist wishes to find ways of erecting the bridge quickly, efficiently, and effectively. The Heideggerian conceives of the bridge as an expression of and a preserver of the fourfold (earth, sky, the gods, and mortals). The bridge does not simply provide a convenient way across the river by connecting the banks on either side. Rather, the bridge brings to awareness the existence of the two banks of the river, each with its own difference, yet now tied together by the bridge, which brings the banks and the river into a single neighborhood, into a single dwelling-place. It should enhance each of the banks, in their own right, add significance to the river itself, will not ignore the sky but is set against it, and so on. The bridge itself must be understood to be a space, an emptiness in which the fourfold itself can appear. It is a clearing, an opening for Being itself. It is an occasion for dwelling, for the sacred to appear, for the enhancement of neighborhood and of humanity itself. To dwell is to heal our own alienation from the world of nature, from each other, from heaven, and from ourselves. The bridge, if seen to be more than a mere construction, will be an expression of nothingness itself. It is a place where the fourfold arises in a "clearing".

Nishida, too, describes the healing journey, but as the recognition of nothingness and no-mind. The model for what Nishida calls "action intuition" is that of the master painter, or master swordsman, or dancer, or archer, or poet whose integration is such that there is no intervening moment discernible between seeing and acting – all calculation is absent, all goal-oriented desire, all concern about the future, or about the nature of the results to be achieved – for there is only the smooth and seamless seeing-as-acting, action in the here-and-now of this moment. The resulting awareness is the seeing of the self without a self, or a seeing that our surface self faces our deep self within an "...openness without a self. To the extent that this openness is an openness wherein the self opens up without a self, the self belongs to the openness and the openness belongs to the self."²⁰ In this openness, or place, or clearing, everything is transformed, enhanced, and seen as though for the first time. So it is that nirvana is samsara, for our encounter with the everyday reaches all the way to the beholding of the glory of existence (or Being) itself. Our ego-attachment is gone, our various conceptualizations of self and world are no longer present, and we are free to intuit things "as they are" and to act spontaneously. Placed squarely in the eternal now, in the moment of openness, we see as through for the first time, and we are utterly and totally "there". Uncluttered and unmediated by language, logic, and deliberation, we act with effortless freedom upon a world, which is no longer separate from us. We are, we see, and we act from the center of the universe, as though from the center

of an empty circle, as though an expression of the self-determination of nothingness itself. We are at home in the world, and as the world. It is a direct and unconditional plunging into the everyday world, the dusty roads, the rainy days, the cold winters and blazing hot summers, the death of ones we love, and the birth of those we love already. It is the dewdrops on the flower of the indigo iris, the motionless stare of the great blue heron, and walking hand in hand with your lover and friend. It is the regaining of the sense of the mystery of existence, of that awesome awareness that things exist at all, of seeing things in their newness and uniqueness, and it is the cherishing of such things as the Japanese cherish the fragile cherry blossoms: they may bloom only for a day, or for a week, but their magnificent beauty will persist only for a short time. Drink them in through your senses while you can, for they symbolize the passing of all things, the emptiness of all things insofar as all things are non-substantial and impermanent, and yet at the same time they re-inform us that all things are lined with the holy, with the mystery. The fragile cherry blossom reminds us of that incredible urgency to exist, to persist, to flourish, and eventually to merge once again with that nothingness which is both our origin and our destiny. We, and all else that is, are but waves on the ocean of existence, whipped-up into a brief existence by the winds of time and desire, and already sinking back into the sea of existence as we live, flourish, age, and die.

The Zen scholar, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, describes this wave/ocean metaphor particularly well in his essay, "The Characteristics of Eastern Nothingness": "Waves are not something coming from outside of the water and reflected in it. Waves are produced by the water and are never separate from it. They then return to water – their original source – without leaving the slightest trace. As far as the wave is concerned, it arises from the water and returns to it. But in terms of the water, the waves are the water's movement. For the wave, the water is one and inseparable with it; yet the water does not come into being and disappear, increase or decrease as the wave does. Water as wave arises and ceases; water as water does neither. Transforming into a thousand or ten thousand waves, the water remains constant and unchanging."²¹

The world has become utterly transformed, and now shines with a quality of shimmering intensity and yet complete tranquility and just-so-ness, and both at the same time. All that is, is a multiple expression of an original and primal oneness that gave expression to the many, like the waves on the ocean surface, or the facet-surfaces on the jewel that is reality, which may be distinguished for a period of time, but which are never separate from the source. And it is Basho, the Japanese master haiku poet, who expresses this best, in his pointed yet indirect way: The old pond, a frog jumps in – splash! Once again – the old pond, a frog jumps in – splash!

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Did you catch sight of the invisible and unspeakable lining? Did you experience the nothingness? Did you hear the silence? The silence...the healing, infinitely rich and dynamically present silence, out of which all noise, all life, all building and all dwelling must come.

NOTES

- 1) Keiji Nishitani, Religion and Nothingness, Jan Van Bragt, tr. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 91.
- 2) Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer," in On the Way to Language, Peter D. Hertz, tr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971).
- 3) Ibid., p. 19.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Graham Parkes, ed., Heidegger and Asian Thought (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 7.
- 6) Martin Heidegger, Essays in Metaphysics: Identity and Difference, Kurt F. Leidecker, tr. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), p. 66.
- 7) Ibid., p. 4.
- 8) Tetsuki Kotoh, "Language and Silence: Self-Inquiry in Heidegger and Zen," in Graham Parkes, Heidegger and Asian Thought (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), pp. 206-07.
- 9) David A. Dilworth, Postscript to Nishida's "Logic of the East," in Nishida Kitaro: Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 130.
- 10) Nishida, Last Writings, 69.
- 11) Ibid., 70.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Frederick J. Streng, Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 89.
- 14) Heidegger, On the Way, 87.
- 15) Ibid., 89.
- 16) Ibid., 88.
- 17) Ibid., 98.
- 18) Ibid., 108.
- 19) Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in Poetry, Language, Thought, Albert Hofstadter, tr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 146-47.
- 20) Ueda Shizuteru, "Pure Experience, Self-awareness, 'Basho'," Etudes Phenomenologiques, no. 18 (1993), p. 83.
- 21) Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, "Characteristics of Eastern Nothingness," in Formless Self Awakening, compiled and edited by Jeff Shore, forthcoming.