



"A citizen of the cosmos?—ridiculous!"

Author(s): Graham Parkes

Source: *The Eastern Buddhist*, Spring 1992, NEW SERIES, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 105-109

Published by: Eastern Buddhist Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/44362074>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Eastern Buddhist Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Eastern Buddhist*

JSTOR

REMINISCENCES

never tired of examining my “grammatical” interpretation and comparing it with what was probably his own “philosophical” understanding. He was placing himself into the indecisive and unsettled state of mind experienced by a student like me at the places in the text about which I felt the least confident, and he was examining the problem from that vantage point. What I wish to stress here is the veritable awe I developed for that tenacity which enabled Sensei to endure being in a state of indecision and yet continue to advance his thinking.

There is little doubt that Sensei’s life was rooted in the Zen which he had long studied and which ultimately colored his way of thinking. This super-logical, so to speak, and practical Zen experience must have given rise to that marvelous tenacious quality of his thinking. In a sense, it is perhaps meaningless to speculate that if he had followed the path of Shinran or of Christ the nature of his thinking would have developed along different lines. I personally think that the thought he did articulate in his writings, while it was rooted in Zen, also embraced Christianity, Pure Land teachings, nihilism, and natural science, as well as any subject deserving to be radically questioned, and sought, moreover, to go beyond them.

“A citizen of the cosmos?—ridiculous!”

Graham Parkes

“If you’d like to pay him a visit, I’ll telephone today and you can probably see him before you leave for Hokkaido.” I had mentioned to Professor Takeichi, who had invited me to present a paper in Kyoto on my first visit to Japan in 1983, that I was interested in Nishitani Sensei’s work, but I had hardly expected that a meeting could be arranged so easily. When I saw him again later that afternoon he informed me that everything was set: I was to present myself at Nishitani’s home the following evening.

Having been enchanted by an earlier stroll through the neighborhood around the Yoshida hill, I had set off early to allow time for a leisurely walk through those fascinating streets that bend somewhat between intersections, causing many of the resulting angles to be anything but right. Knowing enough about the way addresses in Japan work not to believe that “#1 Yoshida” would be of much help, I was hardly surprised to find that following the directions I had taken such care to memorize was not bringing me to

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

stand before the house that had been described. For one thing, though the houses by no means looked the same, they were sufficiently unfamiliar in appearance for the first-time visitor easily to feel lost. Nor were the kanji for *nishi* and *tani*, which I was confident of recognizing, anywhere to be seen.

As I wandered the streets of the neighborhood, however, one house in particular seemed to fit the description I had been given better than the others. Used to conversing in German with the philosophers I had met at Kyoto University, I had been relieved to hear that Nishitani was fluent in that language. And yet it was with some hesitation that I stood in front of the house in question, my finger poised to press the doorbell. I was dubious whether—if I had picked the wrong house—my minimal spoken Japanese would be adequate to the task of explaining my intrusion. But when it occurred to me that “*Nishitani Sensei wa . . .*” spoken hesitantly and with a rising intonation would probably work in this neighborhood, the poised finger proceeded to press.

After a brief interval, the outer door slid open to reveal the face of the Sensei himself looking benignly down at me. I was ushered into the small book-filled room with the sliding door opening on to the tiny garden. Somewhat slow at first, the conversation picked up as my nervousness dissipated in the warmth of Nishitani’s presence. I had a few questions that had occurred to me on reading *Was ist Religion?* (Though I had read parts of the book in English translation, I had somehow come upon the German version before seeing *Religion and Nothingness*). In the course of the evening, prompted by an occasional lull in the conversation, I would pose one of my questions; but instead of responding to it, Nishitani would embark—somewhat to my surprise at first—upon some other, related (and usually more interesting) line of thought.

Some time later, as the conversation finally showed signs of slowing, I began to take my leave—a process I later learned would usually take some time, since the host kept coming up with amplifications of themes discussed earlier in the evening. On looking at my watch once out on the street, I was astounded to see that several hours had passed since my arrival. Later, my friend Eberhard Scheffele would ask whether I had noticed the peculiar passage of time in that little room and remarked the absence of any kind of timepiece there.

Thanks to an invitation from Professor Ueda Shizuteru, I was able to return to Japan several months after my first departure, in order to attend a conference on the dual theme of the relations between Meister Eckhart and Zen and the philosophy of Nishitani Keiji. In a paper that inquired into the ideas of “the moment” and “eternity,” I had suggested that perhaps the parallels between Nietzsche’s ideas and certain strands of Zen thinking on the

REMINISCENCES

topic could be pursued farther than Nishitani seemed to allow. In the course of an after-dinner conversation his smiles and nods in between puffs on his cigarette gave the impression that he thought there might be something to this suggestion. But the most striking thing about this meeting was the way most of his remarks took the form of questions, quietly posed yet intensely.

We were discussing the section *Mittags*, “At Midday,” in Part Four of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, musing over the moment in which Zarathustra feels himself fall into the well of eternity and the abyss of the heaven above him. We wondered about Zarathustra’s asking the heaven when it will drink back “this drop of dew that fell on all earthly things . . . this marvelous soul.” “What is this drop of dew?” Nishitani asked, with great deliberation; “That dew . . . what is it really?” “When, fountain of eternity, you serene and awful abyss of midday, will you drink my soul back into you?”

A few years later, I went to Kyoto in order to discuss with Nishitani a draft of a translation my wife and I had done of his 1949 text *Nihirizumu*. I had heard in advance that he had suffered an accident and illness. I went to the house alone and resolved not to stay for too long, fearful of tiring my host. After several hours of conversation I realized that two of my questions from my previous visit had been discussed, and before the night was over a third had been dealt with. A pattern was emerging: questions posed at one meeting would be answered the next time we met. This pace, which had initially disconcerted, now seemed perfect—and a consummate exemplification of the temporality lived by this ripened thinker.

The conversation took a turn to places we had traveled to and lived in. Nishitani spoke of his sojourn in Germany in the late thirties, and his travels to other countries around that time. I knew he had later visited Hawaii for a conference and we talked about that. He asked how it was to live in the tropics, and I responded that for a Scot it was somehow disturbingly comfortable, and that after almost twenty years away I was beginning to feel nostalgic about Europe. Yes, he said, he could appreciate that. “Although,” he went on, “it is rather odd. I am a Japanese, and yet . . . I mean I was born in Japan, and have lived most of my life here in Kyoto, but somehow . . . although I suppose I’m a Japanese citizen . . . it’s more as if I were, in some sense . . . a citizen of the cosmos.” The open face broke into a broad grin—and with a laughing wave of the hand he abruptly canceled the last remark by exclaiming, “No, no, that’s ridiculous!”

Exhaling a puff of cigarette smoke he shook his head, with a low chuckle, as if to banish completely the vestiges of what seemed to me a perfect self-characterization on his part. As I gazed upon that serene, smoke-haloed countenance, I thought of the lifetime of thinking that informed it, and of the

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

depths of soul plumbed by that far-reaching mind; and I too chuckled quietly—but at the aptness of his modestly disavowed description. As usual, and in spite of my resolve, it proved impossible to leave before the early hours of the morning.

In the final stages of the editing of *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, James Heisig and I went to the house in Yoshida in order to bring the author up to date on the progress of the project. Professor Horio Tsutomu was also there. We sat for several hours—again late into the night—in the small book-filled study, with the sounds of the early summer rain falling in the small garden just outside the opened sliding doors providing the perfect background to the conversation. At one point, realizing that I was missing much of the conversation in Japanese, James Heisig switched to English. Much to my surprise, our host spoke English fluently! A combination of early circumstances had dictated that our conversational relationship would begin *auf Deutsch*—and it had never occurred to me that my interlocutor would have been just as comfortable speaking in English. In retrospect, however, the initial medium seems appropriate.

Much of the talk that evening circled around the topic of nothing. At one point, speaking of the self, Nishitani quoted his favorite saying of Saint Paul: “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” “*Who* is speaking here?” he asked—an old familiar question. It is evidently not the “I”; nor does it appear to be Christ either. Who, then, is it? “Just who *is* this self?”

Later in the evening, the question recurred in a different form. Always in this room, it seems, there is a single rose in a bamboo vase standing on a shelf above the table. A piece of tape covering a crack in the bamboo contributes to the rightness of the ensemble. Looking over at the rose, Nishitani asked in quiet puzzlement, “*Where* is the flower blooming? . . . What about the locus of the unfolding of this rose? . . . Where does it bloom from?” He went on to muse upon the notion of nature, invoking Spinoza’s *natura naturans*. But again this reflection turned out to be the question of the self—the topic of the book we had just translated and the focal point of all the author’s thinking.

Later still, Nishitani spoke of the Zen idea of “going to the mountain” in retreat from the world, remarking on the surprising power of the distractions even after an escape from the busyness of everyday urban life. Then the sound of the wind or the birds can become every bit as disruptive to one’s practice as the noise of the traffic or the neighbors was in the city. The final, most difficult task is to retain whatever understanding has been attained through contemplative isolation after the return to and amidst the welter of everyday life. Here, I thought, is someone who lives this most difficult of truths.

By the time we were finally ready to go, it had started to rain. We began to take our leave, but in spite of our protests the host followed us out into the

REMINISCENCES

street, having donned his wooden sandals and picked up an umbrella. Ignoring our entreaties to return home because of the inclement weather, the frail figure walked with us through the rain-swept night. Fortunately, it was not long before we found a taxi, the buses having stopped running many hours previously. Having said our final goodbyes, we bundled into the car and out of the rain. As the taxi turned around to drive off, we waved at the figure standing on the kerb. The umbrella tilted in silent salute. Watching raindrops fall upon the domed forehead of that true citizen of the cosmos, I wondered again about the dew that falls upon all earthly things.

Nishitani Keiji the Person

Sasaki Jōshū

My encounter with Nishitani Sensei marked an important turning point in my life. It was through two old friends of mine, Kataoka Hitoshi and Kanō Jisuke, that I met Nishitani Keiji. They came to visit me only two years after I had been assigned to our Los Angeles temple, the Rinzai-ji. “Do you know who Nishitani Keiji is? Have you read his book *Shūkyō to wa nanika? (What is Religion?)*,” Kataoka asked. I confessed I did not know the name. They later sent me a copy of his book and even arranged for me to meet the professor. He stayed at our temple en route to a conference elsewhere in America.

When I met Nishitani Keiji in person, I told him how much I enjoyed his work, but to this he modestly replied, “Well, Roshi, I’d hoped you hadn’t read it.” This response puzzled me at first. I wondered what he meant. Is it unworthy of a roshi to read a book of Zen insight? Or did he think Zen masters were not philosophers and so had little to gain? I admit I am no scholar and am unfamiliar with philosophical terms, but I remember being greatly impressed by the second and sixth chapters of his book. While most people have difficulty expressing Zen in words, Nishitani Sensei had a wonderful gift for expressing his understanding freely. That’s why I wanted everyone interested in Zen to read his book. When I told him I felt fortunate to have read it, he smiled and thanked me for the compliment, but I could tell he was rather embarrassed by what I had said.

We talked about friends we had in common, especially Kataoka and Kanō. Kataoka I knew from Hokkaido, when I was a novice monk at Zuiryō-ji temple in Sapporo. This was right after I had finished the eighth grade. I