

Nishitani Keiji's "The Standpoint of Zen: Directly Pointing to the Mind"

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Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) is arguably the most famous and most significant modern “philosopher of Zen.” There are of course many renowned modern Zen masters, and a number of famous modern Japanese philosophers—beginning with Nishida Kitarō, the founder of the Kyoto School, of which Nishitani is the central figure of the second generation. Yet Nishitani stands out for being a first-rate philosopher who also thoroughly practiced and reflected on Zen Buddhism.

Nishitani never simply conflated the critical and speculative thinking of philosophy with the experiential practice of Zen; rather, he saw philosophy’s rational pursuit of wisdom and Zen’s embodied “investigation into the self” as mutually supportive endeavors in a life of “sitting [in meditation], then thinking; thinking, then sitting.” Although he was by profession a philosopher, he was one who recognized the limits of merely intellectual inquiry in fully addressing the existential plight of human beings, especially in an age of nihilism. Both his philosophical studies and his personal journey led him to take up the practice of Zen together with the study of Buddhist thought.

Although Nishitani always preferred to consider himself first and foremost a philosopher, rejecting for example the label of “natural theologian of Zen,” he did come to philosophize explicitly from and about what he called “the standpoint of Zen.” Even so, in the preface to his magnum opus, *What Is Religion?* (translated as *Religion and Nothingness*, 1982), he says that “this does not mean that a position is being taken from the start on the doctrines of Buddhism as a particular religion or on the doctrines of one of

its sects.” While he tends to adopt the central terms of his philosophy from Buddhism, and from Zen in particular, this is said to be done only “insofar as they illuminate reality and the essence and actuality of human being.”¹ Nevertheless, near the end of *What Is Religion?* Nishitani does claim: “If I have frequently had occasion to deal with the standpoints of Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, the fundamental reason is that [the original form of reality and the original countenance of human being] seem to me to appear there most plainly and unmistakably.”²

In the preface to the sequel volume to his magnum opus, *The Standpoint of Zen*, Nishitani explains the role of philosophy for him as that of a two-way mediator between Zen and the everyday world. He writes of “proceeding on a path from the pre-philosophical to philosophy, and then further from philosophy to the post-philosophical. Yet at the same time this implies the reverse direction, in other words, a return path from the standpoint of the ‘practice’ of Zen, through the standpoint of philosophy, and back to the place of the pre-philosophical.”³

When Nishitani speaks of “philosophy” here, he is clearly referring in part to the Western academic discipline that was introduced into Japan beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in several areas of which he himself was a leading expert. (Nishitani wrote extensively on German Idealism and existentialism, as well as on Meister Eckhart and Christian mysticism.) But he is presumably also referring to the philosophies of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with which he also became intimately familiar. Whereas in *What Is Religion?* he often alludes to Madhyamaka, Tiantai, and especially Huayan thought, in the passages excerpted here from the opening chapter of *The Standpoint of Zen* he seeks to clarify the relation of Vijñaptimātratā (“consciousness-only,” also known as Cittamātra or “mind-only”) philosophy to Zen, as well as comparing and contrasting these along the way with aspects of Western thought.

While drawing deeply on consciousness-only or mind-only philosophy for its understanding of the “mind” that is to be “directly pointed to” in order to “see into one’s own true nature and become a Buddha,” ultimately Zen emphasizes the necessity of “slicing right through the field of the eighth consciousness” (Hakuin). That is to say, in order to enable a direct nondual engagement in the world, one must cut off the very root of the ego-subject’s karmic consciousness, a consciousness that allows the world to be experienced only through dualistic lenses crafted by habitual volitional impulses. Nishitani claims that the nondualistic standpoint of Zen, attained by way of uprooting this source of dualistic consciousness, can ultimately be understood no more in terms of “idealism” than in terms of “materialism.”

1. Nishitani 1986–95: 10:v; Nishitani 1982: xlix.

2. Nishitani 1986–95:10:288; Nishitani 1982: 261.

3. Nishitani 1986–95:11: 8.

In the first half of "The Standpoint of Zen," which is not reproduced here, Nishitani explains Zen in terms of what Daitō Kokushi called an "investigation into the self" (*koji-kyūmei*). Nishitani compares and contrasts this investigation with Socrates' quest to "know thyself," as well as comparing and contrasting Descartes's method of doubt with the "great doubt" involved in Zen practice. In the second half of "The Standpoint of Zen," from which the following selections are taken, he proceeds to examine the "direct pointing to the mind" that is the ultimate aim of this radical path of self-investigation.⁴

Translation

...Zen is the standpoint which exhaustively investigates the self itself. It is also spoken of as the way which sees through to the original face of the self...Zen is [ultimately then] the standpoint of "directly pointing to the human mind, seeing into one's own true nature and becoming a Buddha."...How is the "human mind" conceived in this expression? The term *mind* is one which is constantly used throughout Buddhism, not only in Zen. What does this term refer to? Generally speaking, how we conceive the mind is thought to radically influence how we view the human being. The same holds true for how we view "the self": the way we view the mind may give rise to various ways of thinking when we investigate the self. The divergence in the Eastern and Western views of the human being may be said to be based on the difference in how the mind is thought of, and in turn how the self is viewed.

Ordinarily we think of ourselves as having a mind, or that there is a mind within us. When the mind is thought of as the unity of various faculties such as sensation, the appetites, cognition and the like, then the self becomes that which possesses these faculties. And since all things in the world, including human beings, are known only via the self's sensations and intellect, the self is the vantage point from which all things come to be seen. In this sense, the self takes on the appearance of always being located at the center of everything. The mental faculties of the self are like beams of light emitted in all

4. The text presented here consists of selections from the second half of Nishitani's "Zen no tachiba" (The standpoint of Zen); the subtitle has been added by the editor. The original text was first published in *Kōza Zen*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1967) before being placed at the beginning of a book by the same title, *The Standpoint of Zen*, which is now available as vol. 11 of Nishitani 1986–95. The translation, which has been reprinted here with only a few modifications by the editor, was done by John C. Maraldo and published in *The Eastern Buddhist* 17/1 (1984): 1–26 (with the exception of the first two sentences, the selections reprinted here are from pp. 12–26). The translator informs us that he was able to consult directly with Nishitani, and that "revisions have been made by the author in collaboration with the translator." We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

directions from this center. Entailed by this notion of self is a mode of being: it is itself the center of the world. The self sees and grasps the self placing itself in the center, opposite all other things. This is the self's self-centered mode of being and way of seeing. That is, thinking of the self as having a mind, and thinking of this mind as the unity of various faculties, both reflect the self's self-centered mode of being.

On the other hand, a completely opposite way of viewing matters is also possible, and in fact has existed since ancient times. In contrast to viewing the mind from the vantage point of one's "self," the mind is seen from the vantage point of the "world." ... From this viewpoint, that which is seen as the faculties the self "possesses" within it, each "faculty" or "power" *sui generis*, can also be seen as something which extends throughout the world and has universality. ... Assuming a different way of viewing things, then, the mind or faculties within us can be seen as something extending to all other living beings, with the world as its field. From this perspective, the "minds" which exist within all individual living things or human beings are individuations of the great "mind" extending throughout the world. ...

The way of seeing which sees the mind from the field of the world forms the basis of diverse myths in both East and West, and has found its way into various religions and philosophies. It constitutes from the beginning a strong undercurrent in the history of Western philosophy, where concepts like World-soul and World-mind have often appeared. Suffice it here to cite as examples the names of Anaxagoras, Plotinus and Schelling. Viewed from such a perspective, the "mind" assumes rather the central position in the universe or world and forms the vantage point from which all things are to be seen. The minds of individual living beings, as well as of individual humans, are as it were beams of light emitted from that center. We cannot go into details here, but a way of seeing along these lines has deeply permeated the *Geistesgeschichte* of the world. Looking at the human being as a microcosm over against the macrocosm, for example, derives from such a way of seeing. In a word, it can be called a cosmocentric way of viewing the mind. ...

The two ways of viewing the mind, cosmocentric and self-centric, have been inseparably preserved throughout Buddhism, in marked contrast to the West. ... In Buddhism, the mind that discriminates between subject and object, and between the mind itself and other things, has been considered from a holistic standpoint as part of cosmic, universal mind. As representative of this standpoint we can cite the theory of *vijñaptimātratā*, consciousness-only.⁵ In rough outline, the theory of consciousness-only is a system which places in the center of Buddhist doctrine the "mind," ontologically

5. The doctrine of *vijñaptimātratā* ("consciousness-only") is generally synonymous with *cittamātra* ("mind-only"). The school that developed this philosophy is most often referred to as Yogācāra.

speaking, or "consciousness" (*vijñāna*) epistemologically speaking, or in general "mind-consciousness."...

As is commonly known, consciousness-only theory distinguishes eight consciousnesses. The first five are sensations such as seeing, hearing and the like; the sixth, *mano-vijñāna* or thought-consciousness, unifying the first five, gives rise via judgment to cognitive knowledge. It seems almost comparable to the *sensus communis* and judgmental intellect combined of the medieval scholastic theory of mind in the West. In the seventh, *manas* or self-consciousness, the unifying function of the sixth becomes consciousness for-itself; here, along with self-attachment (*ātma-grāha*), arises the notion of ego-self, and one lapses into a self-centered way of being.... [Thus] far this theory for the most part runs parallel to the structure of "consciousness" as it has been conceived in the West since ancient times. However, a fundamental difference from the Western way of viewing consciousness and mind appears when the Eastern doctrine posits, as the ground of all, an eighth root consciousness, called the *ālaya* or store consciousness.

The *ālaya*-consciousness most aptly manifests the character of mind previously said to be universal on the world-plane. Constituting the basis of our minds, it is at the same time of the nature of what may be called a cosmic consciousness, or rather a cosmic unconscious. This unconscious is of course not to be understood merely in a psychological sense, but also as having ontological significance such as is implied in the concept of "life." Just as the "life" of living things is thought on the one hand to be the root potentiality out of which faculties such as sensations, emotions, impulses, appetites and finally intelligence are generated, and taken on the other hand as pervading our flesh and giving it life, the *ālaya*-consciousness is understood to include the aspect we call universal "life" of the world-plane.... Such an *ālaya*-consciousness lies latent at the base of the human mind and of the minds of all living things. And the activity of the human mind, acting from within the sphere of the *ālaya*-consciousness, sets in motion the consciousnesses up to the seventh one like a seed stretching out, and gives rise to our seeing, hearing, perceiving and knowing, our egoistic notions and ego-attachment. All these are the synthetic acts of the seven consciousnesses, whose influence in turn reaches the very depths of the mind and leaves traces in the *ālaya*-consciousness. These traces are deposited as new seeds in the *ālaya*-consciousness and thus become the potentialities for new activity in our mind-consciousness....

Our egoistic mode of being, our being ego-selves, signifies the mode of being of a mind-consciousness which divides subject and object, self and external world, or which, in terms of *vijñaptimātratā* or consciousness-only theory, divides consciousness (*vijñāna*) and its surrounding world of objects (*visaya*), and is in this sense the discriminating mind. It is the mind which grasps itself as if it were isolated from the world. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental teachings of consciousness-only theory consists in bringing to light the inauthenticity of this discriminating mind. The standpoint

of discrimination is that of placing the ego-self in the center, regarding the things of the so-called external world, and becoming attached to them. But attachment to things is only the other side of attachment to self. It is a two-fold process: in the course of being attached to itself, the ego-self is attached to things, and in the course of being attached to things, it is attached to itself. While dividing self and things, it is tied to things and hence can neither truly become one with things nor truly become one's self. This mode of being is an essential, intrinsic aspect of the human mind; but regarded from the field of the *ālaya*-consciousness which forms the basis of this discriminative mind, the standpoint of the latter proves to have no foundation in truth whatsoever, to be "imaginary in nature" (*parikalpita svabhāva*).

Discriminative knowledge is essentially falsehood (*abhūta parikalpa*). Yet at the same time, considering the essential connection between the seventh consciousness which is the seat of the discriminating mind, and the eighth or *ālaya*-consciousness, we can see how difficult it is to shake off this falsity. For the *ālaya*-consciousness which becomes the ground for pointing out the falsity of discrimination is at the same time the hidden root of discrimination; the two are as inseparable as roots from the earth. Therefore, in order to free oneself from the discriminating mind and negate its falsity, one must break through the eighth as well as the seventh consciousness. To crack the rigid frame of the ego-self, the force binding the frame together must also be torn loose from its roots up. This great latent force, determining the apparently free discriminative activity of the ego-self from within its hidden depths, imparts to it the character of necessity called karma. The connection between the seventh and eighth consciousnesses can in this sense also be designated the "karma-consciousness" of *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*. Breaking through the frame of the ego-self is only accomplished by cutting the roots of this karma-consciousness which reach to its depths. This is the meaning of Zen master Hakuin's saying, "Slice right through the field of the eighth consciousness."

To cut through the mind of self-attachment that arises in the form of the ego-self is at the same time to go beyond the world (or the so-called "three worlds" of desire, form, and formlessness). This is the "great death" of Zen, which cuts through the roots of life and death for the first time. In consciousness-only theory, it is said that in extinguishing *vijñāna* or consciousness, the *viśaya* or world of objects over against it is finally extinguished. What comes to be manifest here is the non-discriminating or fundamental knowledge which in usual Buddhist parlance is called *prajñā*. Its standpoint is that which has transcended the world to the "other shore," which has gone beyond all possible beings in their very beingness, i.e., insofar as they are thought to *be*, and in this sense is called absolute emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This of course does not mean void or empty in a privative sense, emptiness as opposed to fullness. Rather it is the standpoint of the oneness of mind and things. Here all things cease to be the world of objects over against the discriminative mind, and manifest their true form in the field of absolute

emptiness. All things manifesting their true form is nothing other than non-discriminating knowledge. This then is the standpoint of the great wisdom of the oneness of things and mind, the wisdom that is *prajñā*. It is here that the realization of self as no-self, the awareness of one's own true self, occurs. All things are brought to light as being originally without self-nature, "self"-less, as being no-self-nature. All things are "no-self-nature as emptiness." And this at the same time means that each and every thing becomes manifest in its true reality. Consciousness-only theory calls this field of self-realization or awareness "*parinispanna svabhāva*"—perfected, real nature.

Earlier I cited the Zen saying, "Directly pointing to the human mind, seeing into one's own true nature and becoming a Buddha." From the example of consciousness-only theory just given we may surmise the kind of background against which "the human mind" is understood. Based in its depths on the universal mind coextensive with the whole world which it has in common with all other animals, the human mind sinks roots as far as the *ālaya*-consciousness that may be said to underlie the "three worlds" in their entirety. And where this underlying basis is overcome, there the field of absolute emptiness is lying in wait. This overall background is borne deep in the mind of even a single human being and forms his or her self-nature.... But within one's own mind to which one returns is stored the source of the mind of all living things, that is to say, the place of *prajñā*-emptiness which is oneness with things as they really are. The investigation of one's own mind, when it is radically pursued, takes on the meaning of seeing through to the core of sentient beings, the world, and Buddha....

Our Zen slogan—"Directly pointing to the human mind, seeing into one's own true nature and becoming a Buddha"—can be said to gather the doctrine of "mind" with its epistemological, ontological and cosmological character as found, for example, in consciousness-only theory, directly into the standpoint of existence and to turn it into the real content of existential self-investigation....

In the tenth century, during the Period of the Five Dynasties in China, Hōgen Bun'eki (Fayan Wenyi), who had founded a particular style of Zen known as the Hōgen School, wrote a verse on "perfected real nature." Since we have touched upon the consciousness-only theory, let us cite this verse as an example of how this doctrine was assimilated into Zen and given existential import.

With reason exhausted, feelings and deliberations are forgotten.
How can there be a likeness [to anything]!
Right here this frosty night's moon
Sinks serenely into the river valley ahead.
Ripened fruit hangs heavy with monkeys,
The mountains deepen as if to lead astray.
Raising my head, there's still some light—
Originally to the west of my abode.

“Perfected real nature” means that by way of the investigation of self the Buddha-nature of the self comes to be manifest out of the self like an unearthed jewel. At the point where the discriminating mind (the “feelings and deliberations” of our verse) has scrutinized reason exhaustively and reached the extremity of reason, it forgets itself, and forgets reason as well. Our original self-nature, Hakuin’s “self-nature as no-nature,” shines forth as something beyond comparison. “My mind is like the autumn moon,” writes the Chinese poet Hanshan (Cold Mountain); but, he continues, it really withstands all comparison—this moon shining purely in the deep, blue pool of water. In Högen’s verse, the moon setting in the river valley on a frosty night, the monkeys coming to pick the fruit, etc., all only depict features of Högen’s daily mountain life. All this, however, is no other than “perfected real nature” as the Zen state. It is, as it is, the mind of Högen, a man of Zen. We must not understand the features expressed in this verse as a description of a landscape. The Zen master Kassan Zenne (Jiashan Shanhui, named after the mountain of his abode), was once asked, “How are things around Kassan?” He replied, “Monkeys holding their young in their arms retreat behind the blue ridge, birds holding flowers in their beaks plummet before the blue cliff.” Tradition has it that Högen said of this phrase, “For thirty years I mistook this to be a picture of the world around Kassan.” Whatever Högen might have really meant at the time he said this, the features of Högen’s mountain life in the verse above as well are not just a description of the world around a quiet, secluded place in the mountains.

At the conclusion of his *Faust* Goethe has the Chorus Mysticus sing, “*Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*”—all changing things are only the likeness [of eternal things]. The expression “likeness” in the second line of Högen’s verse is indeed the equivalent of this *Gleichnis*. But for Goethe the features of mountain life too would belong to the world of changing things, would be only a likeness of eternal things. Yet Högen’s self-nature is something wholly beyond likening. It transcends the distinction between impermanence and eternity; it goes beyond the relativity of impermanent vs. eternal. If we are to speak of the impermanent, then the features of this mountain life are impermanent through and through, are not even a likeness, metaphor, or symbol of eternal things. They are, as they are, the real aspects of mountain life. Or, if we are to speak of the eternal, they are eternal through and through, for which we cannot even find a likeness in the impermanent. They are, as they are, emptiness, and absolute emptiness, as such, is the suchness of mountain life—is ultimately Högen’s own mind. In comparison, even Goethe can be said to have lapsed into reason, into *logos*. Högen’s state here reveals the existentialized version of the “perfected real nature” of consciousness-only theory.

The problem of mind came to be a central issue throughout the history of Buddhism.... What we said above of Högen and consciousness-only theory was nothing more than simply one example of this—except that the occasion of Högen’s attaining satori for the first time bears a special relation to

consciousness-only theory. The story is as follows. On a pilgrimage seeking the Way with two companion monks, Hōgen stopped to rest at the temple of a Zen priest named Jizō (Dicang) one rainy day. When the rain cleared and they were about to set off again, Jizō, who had come to see them off, remarked, "It is said you usually expound the doctrine that the three worlds are mind only." Then, pointing to a rock in the garden, he asked, "Is that rock inside your mind or outside it?" "Inside my mind, of course," was the answer Hōgen gave, typical of consciousness-only theory. Jizō immediately retorted, "By what karmic fate I do not know, but a man is wandering around with a lump of stone in his mind. He must feel quite heavy." At a loss for a word to counter, Hōgen at length took off his sandals again and stayed on together with his companions, advancing various views to settle the issue. After a month or so of this, the monk Jizō at last said, "According to the Buddha Dharma, all things come into view [as they are]." It is said that Hōgen was greatly enlightened upon hearing this.

"All things come into view [as they are]" means that the Buddha Dharma manifests itself precisely therein, that every single thing is manifest entirely as it is, as clearly and distinctly as what one sees in one's own hand. This is the basic principle of "three worlds—mind only," but as it is treated from the standpoint of Zen. In the way of self-investigation called "directly pointing to the human mind," this signifies that "I" directly see "myself" in the appearance of every single thing just as it is, as though two mirrors were mutually reflecting one another. In contrast, when Hōgen first answered "in my mind," his "three worlds—mind only" was, to use the modern idiom, an idealistic position. It was a standpoint of seeing the rock as a mental entity. Yet the opposite of this mentalism of "mind only," i.e., a materialism of "things only," would fare no better. So long as the materialist is unable to see in one manifest rock the reality of the self that absolutely cannot be objectified, the shadow of the self that sees the rock will be projected, so to speak, upon the rock's hidden side. Materialism cannot escape the situation that the problem of the mind lies concealed in the appearance of every material thing. Or we can put it this way: if idealism's "in the mind" loads the rock into the front of the mind, materialism's "outside the mind" sticks the mind onto the back of the rock. From the standpoint of Zen, both mind and things are seen from a perspective that completely transcends these two opposed ways of seeing.

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