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## CHAPTER 21

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# NISHITANI KEIJI: PRACTICING PHILOSOPHY AS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

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GRAHAM PARKES

生死大事

“Life and death—the great matter.”<sup>1</sup>

In an essay called “My Philosophical Starting Point,” the Kyoto School thinker Nishitani Keiji (1900–90) writes of “one fundamental concern that was constantly at work” in his early interest in figures like Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, on the one hand, and Zen thinkers such as Hakuin and Takuan on the other: “a doubt concerning the very existence of the self, something like the Buddhist ‘Great Doubt’ (*daigi* 大疑).” In another brief memoir, “The Time of My Youth,” Nishitani writes of the utter hopelessness of that period of his life, compounded by the death of his father when he was fourteen. He himself succumbed shortly thereafter to an illness similar to the tuberculosis that had killed his father, in the course of which he felt “the specter of death taking hold.” These grim experiences, pervaded by a mood of “nihilism,” prompted him to take up the study of philosophy:

My life as a young man can be described in a single phrase: it was a period absolutely without hope . . . My life at the time lay entirely in the grips of nihilism and despair . . . My decision, then, to study philosophy was in fact—melodramatic as it might sound—a matter of life and death.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chinese Buddhist maxim. My thanks to James Heisig for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Nishitani, cited in Heisig 2001, 191.

This basis in profound existential concern distinguishes Nishitani's thought from the philosophies of the senior Kyoto School thinkers, Nishida and Tanabe, which tend to be more speculative and abstract. It was reinforced by Nishitani's engagement with Zen Buddhist practice (zazen meditation) for more than two decades, a physical practice that grounded his thinking in lived experience.<sup>3</sup> He further distinguishes himself from Nishida and Tanabe, who drew from ideas in Western philosophy mainly to better articulate their own thought, by a deeper engagement with European thinkers that aimed to build bridges between Western and Asian philosophies: "to lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making, for a world united beyond differences of East and West."<sup>4</sup> But Nishitani's existential thinking also poses a radical challenge to mainstream Western philosophy: by comparison with a thinking derived from the Buddhist tradition, most Western thought is superficial, dealing with surface phenomena of consciousness and thereby failing to attain a deep understanding of or engagement with the people and things with which we interact.

To convey the power of this challenge and do justice to Nishitani's concern to philosophize "as a matter of life and death," an introduction to his thinking does well to focus on his understanding of human existence as consisting in three levels, or "fields" (*ba* 場), as explicated in his masterpiece from 1961, *Religion and Nothingness* (original Japanese title: *Shūkyō to wa nanika* 宗教とは何か [What Is Religion?]). The three levels are: the field of consciousness (which embraces what he calls "the field of sensation" and "the field of reason"), below that the field of nihilism (*kyōmu* 虚無), and underlying that the field of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*; Jp. *kū* 空).<sup>5</sup> These fields are always co-present, and each deeper field is more extensive and encompassing than the one above it. On the field of consciousness (which is where most of us live most of our waking lives) we exist, so to say, in a "life" perspective; the field of nihilism represents by contrast a "death" perspective; and the field of emptiness offers a death perspective on life, or a "death-life" perspective. Insofar as existing on the field of emptiness offers us, on the Buddhist view, the most enlightened life, this death-life perspective enables us to understand and live life to the fullest.

The challenge to Western philosophy comes from Nishitani's suggestion that it has mostly been conducted on and has often taken as its topic the field of consciousness, where (in the Kantian terms that Nishitani uses) we have no access to things themselves but only to representations of them to ourselves as subjects of consciousness. By contrast, on the field of emptiness, we can break through how things appear to human subjects and encounter them as they are in themselves, "on their home ground," as Nishitani puts it. The claim that Western philosophy has generally failed to explore two significant fields of human existence is well worth pondering because this failure impoverishes our

<sup>3</sup> Heisig 2001, 184. For a discussion of Nishitani's views on "psychosomatic practice," see Davis 2013; and for the centrality of bodily practice to classical Chinese and Japanese philosophy more generally, see Parkes 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Nishitani, writing in the mid-1960s, cited by Jan van Bragt in Nishitani 1982, xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> Nishitani 1982, 108-112.

experience as well as our philosophy: “Ontology needs to pass through nihility and shift to an entirely new field, different from what it has known hitherto.”<sup>6</sup>

Because Nishitani doesn’t characterize the field of nihility in much detail, and his commentators tend to neglect it in favor of emptiness, the discussion to follow will devote relatively more time to the experience of nihility. But because there are some significant prefigurations of Nishitani’s ideas about death and life in earlier thinkers who influenced him, it may help to begin with those.

## PRECURSORS IN THE FIELD

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Chinese Daoist philosophy understands life and death as interdependent and complementary phenomena, alternating phases in the constant transformations between *yang* and *yin*. The *Daodejing* remarks that ordinary people overlook this, ignoring death because of their preoccupation with life and its largess:

The people treat death lightly:  
It is because the people set too much store by life  
That they treat death lightly.<sup>7</sup>

The interdependence of life and death is also a prominent theme in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. The Daoist sage is one who can “affirm the rightness” of both life and death, because after all:

How do I know that delighting in life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows the way back? . . . How do I know that the dead don’t regret the way they used to cling to life?<sup>8</sup>

For Zhuangzi, we need to be “released from the fetters” of conventional views of life as good and death as bad so that we can “see life and death as a single string, acceptable and unacceptable as a single thread.” After all, “Life and death are fated, and come with the regularity of day and night”; and since the creative process of the cosmos “labors me with life, eases me with old age, and rests me with death,” this means that “it is precisely because I consider my life good that I consider my death good.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nishitani, cited in Heisig 2001, 221.

<sup>7</sup> Laozi, *Daodejing*, chapter 75. See also Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), chapter 9, “Death and the Death Penalty.”

<sup>8</sup> *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), chapter 2, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 of *Zhuangzi*, 35, 43. See also Roger T. Ames, “Death as Transformation in Classical Daoism,” in Jeff Malpas and Robert Solomon, eds., *Death and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), and Hans-Georg Moeller, *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), chapter 2, sec. 3.

The influence of Zhuangzi is palpably evident, across some fifteen hundred years, in the philosophy of the Sōtō Zen master Dōgen (1200–53), who was in turn a powerful influence on Nishitani and is a major presence in *Religion and Nothingness*. Central to Buddhist philosophy is the notion of impermanence (Skt. *anitya*; Jp. *mujō* 無常): a refrain that echoes throughout the tradition is “All dharmas (phenomena) are impermanent.” All existence—human life naturally included—is understood as a beginningless and endless cycle of arising and perishing, generation and extinction, being born and dying away. But this impermanence doesn’t just mean that things don’t last, that everything that comes into being returns to nothing, but also that everything does so in every instant. This “momentariness,” by virtue of which everything perishes as soon as it arises, is central to the philosophy of Dōgen, who refers to it as “the law of birth and death in each moment”:

Through causes and conditions, the human body . . . is born and perishes moment by moment without ceasing . . . but because of ignorance we don’t notice it . . . What a pity that although we are born and perish at each moment, we don’t notice it!<sup>10</sup>

For Dōgen, one Buddhist practice that helps us notice this condition is sitting meditation—which he calls “zazen-only” (*shikantaza*)—a practice that Nishitani engaged in for decades. Dōgen instructs his students to sit upright, vertically aligned, with “the ears in line with the shoulders, and the nose in line with the navel”:

Keep the eyes open and breathe gently through the nose. Having adjusted your body in this manner, take a breath and exhale fully, then sway your body to left and right . . .

Having received a human life, do not waste the passing moments . . . Human life is like a flash of lightning, transient and illusory, gone in a moment.<sup>11</sup>

The challenge is to maintain complete relaxation of the body and mind together with fully alert attention: without trying to do anything (especially not attain enlightenment), nevertheless to practice—as Dōgen often says—“as if your head were ablaze.” If your hair catches fire you don’t pause to speculate on the cause: rather you immediately set about putting it out.

In sitting zazen, one comes to experience the parallels between the rising and falling of the breath, the arising and subsiding of thoughts, and the continual birth and death of human existence along with the arising and perishing of all things. The moments between, the still turning points between exhalation and inhalation, highlight the utter contingency of the breath in its rise and fall, until its inevitable final fall: the lack of necessary connection between exhalation and the next breath, which may always be the last.

<sup>10</sup> “Virtue of Home Leaving,” in Dōgen 2010, 803.

<sup>11</sup> “Recommending Zazen to All People,” in Dōgen 2010, 908–909.

Dōgen has little use for the term “nirvāna,” which many regard as the goal of the Buddhist life, since for later, Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism nirvāna is not different from “samsāra” (often referred to in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism as “birth-and-death”):

Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvāna. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvāna to be sought. Only when you realise this are you free from birth and death.<sup>12</sup>

It’s a matter neither of avoiding or detaching oneself from birth and death, nor of clinging to or desiring it—but of practicing what the Buddhists call “nonattachment.”

We find a similar idea, framed in terms of a process of departure and return, in the writings of another major influence on Nishitani, the Rinzai Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769). Hakuin constantly urged his listeners and readers to “see into their own true nature” (*kenshō* 見性) by seeing through the illusory nature of the ego-self. This entails being prepared at every moment “to let go your hold when hanging from a sheer precipice, to die and return again to life.” In this context, Hakuin recommends a *kōan*, in the spirit of traditional Buddhist meditations on death:

If you should have the desire to study Zen under a teacher and see into your own nature, you should first investigate the word *shi* [死, death] . . . by investigating the koan: “After you are dead and cremated, where has the main character gone?” Then . . . you will obtain the decisive and ultimate great joy.<sup>13</sup>

## THE FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Let us consider our everyday experience on what Nishitani calls “the field of consciousness,” which he describes at the beginning of *Religion and Nothingness*. We tend to regard this mode of experience as one in which we find ourselves, as subjects of consciousness, in a world of objects to which we ordinarily relate (if we think about it) “by means of concepts and representations.” On the field of consciousness, we “see things from the standpoint of the self.” The talk of “concepts and representations” is a reference to Kant, although Nishitani invokes Plato rather than Kant at this point: when we “sit like spectators in the cave of the self,” we are confined to “watching the shadows passing to and fro across its walls, and calling those shadows ‘reality.’” Nishitani concludes that “on the field of consciousness, it is not possible really to get in touch with things as they are, that is, to face them in their own mode of being and on their own home-ground.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Birth-Death,” in Dōgen 2010, 884.

<sup>13</sup> Hakuin 1971, 135, 219.

<sup>14</sup> Nishitani 1982, 9.

But for Nishitani, it's not only "things as they are" that we can't get in touch with; it's also our own selves:

We also think of our own selves, and of our "inner" thoughts, feelings, and desires as real. But here, too, it is doubtful whether . . . our feelings and desires and so forth are in the proper sense really present to us as they are . . . Precisely because we face things on a field separated from things, and to the extent that we do so, we are forever separated from ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

Most of us, it seems, spend most of our time on the field of consciousness and can get all the way to the grave without ever becoming aware of the fields Nishitani says exist beneath it. If we're happy enough with this, why should it matter—unless we happen to be philosophers, who perhaps should follow the Socratic injunction to "know ourselves"—that we aren't able to get in touch with ourselves or "things as they are"? Well, it may not matter at all. But what if, on the verge of the grave, we discover that we've missed something, that we haven't really lived? Then, of course, it will be too late.

Nishitani believes we can avoid such a dismal outcome by "breaking through the field of consciousness" and "overstepping the field of beings," but it remains unclear in *Religion and Nothingness* just how this is to be accomplished.<sup>16</sup> We get a hint of the way, however, if we go back to an earlier text.

Nishitani's first extended philosophical engagement with death and nihilism took place in a series of lectures he gave in Kyoto in 1949, which have been translated into English under the title *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.<sup>17</sup> Just as there is a resistance, especially in modern times, to acknowledging the reality of death, let alone confronting one's own mortality, so there is a reluctance to admit that life lacks inherent meaning. Nishitani engages this issue through discussions of Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. Paraphrasing Schopenhauer's "Doctrine of the Vanity of Existence," he writes:

For all our pursuit of happiness, at the moment when our life comes to its end in death, it is all one and the same (*einerlei*) whether our life has been happy or unhappy. This is how Schopenhauer sees the nullity of existence grounded in the will to life.<sup>18</sup>

But human beings have always found ways to get around this preposterous situation:

Beginning from the basic necessities of clothing and food, life is filled with urgent matters to attend to, and from these some kind of meaning is given to life. Daily work and amusement are its inherent meaning; they divert the boredom that is its essence as "pastimes" that help one forget life's abyssal nihilism.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Nishitani 1982, 9–10.

<sup>16</sup> Nishitani 1982, 13, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Nishitani 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Nishitani 1990, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Nishitani 1990, 17.

Daily work—overwork especially—seems to work for many people, but if the boredom should reassert itself, we are faced once again with “the essentially void nature of our existence and the existence of all things, their insubstantiality and nullity.”<sup>20</sup> A common response is then

to seek some transcendent meaning through religion or metaphysics in order to escape life’s *ennui* and despair. Having lost its inherent meaning, life is thereby restructured from a transcendent ground and given a purpose. But finally, in time of crisis when even religion, metaphysics, and morality are perceived as null, life becomes *fundamentally* void and boring.<sup>21</sup>

In this context, Nishitani cites Kierkegaard’s magnificent characterization of existential boredom as “demonic pantheism”:

Pantheism ordinarily implies the quality of fullness; with boredom it is the reverse: it is built upon emptiness, but for this very reason it is a pantheistic qualification. Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss.<sup>22</sup>

For Schopenhauer, the solution is simply—as Nishitani, following Nietzsche, reads him—to renounce the will to live and thereby gain emancipation; whereas for Kierkegaard it is a matter of “a radical engagement with the nihility within nihilistic existence, and a thoroughly existential confrontation with original sin and the finitude and death rooted in it.”<sup>23</sup> But for Nishitani such solutions are themselves nihilistic, and, in any case, after “the death of God” in nineteenth-century Europe, the meaninglessness of mortal life grew to become the meaninglessness of all existence: “With this an abyssal nihilism opened up at the ground of history and self-being, and everything turned into a question mark.”<sup>24</sup>

Nishitani follows Nietzsche in thinking that we can “live and experience nihilism” by way of “psychological reflection” that “gets behind” traditional values to reveal their psychological origin, which in turn reveals their contingency and lack of ultimate meaning.<sup>25</sup> Such reflection shows us that the metaphysical comforts of a monotheistic God and another, truer world above or beyond this one are just that: comforting fictions to veil the inherent meaninglessness of a world in which all our achievements and projects come to naught with our death.

In a lecture on Heidegger (with whom he had studied for two years in the late 1930s), Nishitani discusses Heidegger’s idea of nothingness (*das Nichts*) and his “existential

<sup>20</sup> Nishitani 1990, 14–15.

<sup>21</sup> Nishitani 1990, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Nishitani 1990, 18, citing Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I: 291.

<sup>23</sup> Nishitani 1990, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Nishitani 1990, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Nishitani 1990, 32.

conception” of death, both in the light of his own idea of nihilism. He takes Heidegger’s idea that human beings are “held out into” or “suspended over” nothingness to mean that “human being is exposed to nihilism in its very foundation,” and he connects this with the notion that “death is already included within life; it is a way of being that human being takes upon itself as soon as it exists.”<sup>26</sup>

Nishitani goes on to remark the tension in Heidegger’s “being-toward-death” between our being “not yet” at the end of our existence, and, owing to the projective structure of *Dasein*, our also being “always already” at our end—since in projecting possibilities of existence we are “running ahead” and so “come up against death.” The experience of *Angst* shows that our fundamental condition is one of being strangely not-at-home (*unheimlich*) in the world, insofar as “nihilism reveals itself as the ground of beings-as-a-whole.” This revelation comes in “moods” such as *Angst* and boredom, which for Heidegger are modes of *Befindlichkeit*, of finding ourselves disposed in the world in such a way that “the ground of it all is discovered to be nihilism.”<sup>27</sup> The point is that we *find* ourselves in this or that kind of mood: it’s not something that can be consciously willed. This connects with Nishitani’s interest in Nietzsche’s idea of the “self-overcoming of nihilism”: one doesn’t overcome nihilism through a summoning of willpower on the part of the heroic ego, but rather by “living nihilism through to the end in oneself.”<sup>28</sup> As Nishitani said of his own case: “The fundamental problem of my life . . . has always been . . . the overcoming of nihilism through nihilism.”<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, insofar as one is able to respond to the mood of *Angst* by “running ahead” and confronting one’s death while still alive, this opens up “the meaning of *being* truly *there* (*Dasein*).” The authentic confrontation with death thus makes possible full existential realization and ontological revelation.<sup>30</sup>

The field of consciousness can also be broken through by an external event, by some kind of stroke of fate—again something that befalls us rather than something we will. As Nishitani writes in *Religion and Nothingness*:

Take, for example, someone for whom life has become meaningless as a result of the loss of a loved one, or the failure of an undertaking on which he had staked his all. All those things that had once been of use to him become good for nothing. This same process takes place when one comes face to face with death.<sup>31</sup>

In such a condition, we drop through the field of consciousness and find ourselves in a very different world.

<sup>26</sup> Nishitani 1990, 164–165.

<sup>27</sup> Nishitani 1990, 166–167, at 162.

<sup>28</sup> Nishitani 1990, 8, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Heisig 2001, 215.

<sup>30</sup> Nishitani 1990, 166–167.

<sup>31</sup> Nishitani 1982, 3.

## THE FIELD OF NIHILITY

At the beginning of *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani formulates the lessons of *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* with considerable power:

When one comes face to face with death . . . a void appears that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands . . . . In fact, that abyss is always just underfoot. In the case of death, we do not face something that awaits us in some distant future, but something that we bring into the world with us at the moment we are born. Our life runs up against death at its every step; we keep one foot planted in the vale of death at all times. Our life stands poised at the brink of the abyss of nihilism, to which it may return at any moment.<sup>32</sup>

On the field of nihilism, where both the existence of the self and the existence of all things become “a question mark,” we encounter “the Great Doubt.” Nishitani contrasts this condition with Cartesian doubt, in which the ego is doing the doubting, because the Great Doubt comes about precisely through the death, or annihilation, of the ego. For this reason it’s equivalent to what the Zen tradition calls “the Great Death.” It’s a situation where “it is the same with nihilism and death . . . the elemental source of beings one and all is transformed into nihilism, and the world is transformed into a world of death . . . our own utter death.”<sup>33</sup>

It’s a world of death because it’s a world of impermanence, where nothing lasts, especially our selves: everything hovers over the abyss of nihilism. “From the very outset life is at one with death. This means that all living things, just as they are, can be seen under the Form of death.” It’s all a matter of time, and the Zen notion of temporality that Nishitani goes on to elaborate resembles the temporality of Heidegger’s “being-toward-death.” Death isn’t something that happens in the future, because the future isn’t real and death is “very real.”<sup>34</sup> The only reality is the present moment, because the future is yet to come (just as the past has already gone) and its reality (like that of the past) consists in its entering the present moment.

Nietzsche may have been the first to notice how the noisy and exuberant vitality of the modern city actually intimates, to one who has ears to hear, the silence of the grave to which all its citizens are heading.<sup>35</sup> After moving to Genoa, he found that life in that great bustling port on the Mediterranean coast contrasted delightfully with the sepulchral atmosphere of his homeland in the north of Germany. An aphorism “The Thought

<sup>32</sup> Nishitani 1982, 3–4.

<sup>33</sup> Nishitani 1982, 17–21, 230.

<sup>34</sup> Nishitani 1982, 50, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Science*, aphorism 278; *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), vol. 3, 523, my translation.

of Death” tinges this delight with sadness, foreshadowing Nishitani’s ideas so forcefully that it’s worth citing at length:

It gives me a melancholy pleasure to live in the midst of this jumble of little lanes, of needs, of voices: how much enjoyment, impatience, and desire, how much thirsty life and intoxication with life comes to light at every moment! And yet for all these clamorous, lively, life-thirsty people it will soon be so silent! And behind each one of them his shadow stands, as his dark fellow traveller! It is always as in the last moment before the departure of an emigrant ship: there is more to say than ever before, the hour is at hand, and the ocean with its desolate silence is waiting impatiently behind all this noise—so covetous and certain of its prey.

The clamorous exuberance of the modern city, where desires and lust for life continually gush to the surface, is at a deeper level a defensive, nihilistic reaction against the silent imminence of death. Shadowed by our death-selves, we’re already heading for the quiet of the grave, at the last moment before embarking on the voyage out, one foot planted on the bark of death. Modernity’s breaking with the past is accompanied by a reduction in mortality rates and a loosening of community ties that removes death from its hitherto central place within everyday life. Nietzsche liked to spend time in the spectacular Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno, on the outskirts of Genoa, a place where community ties to the dead remain close. The aphorism continues:

And each and every one of them supposes that the heretofore means little or nothing, and that the near future is everything: hence this haste, this clamour, this drowning out and overreaching of each other. Everyone wants to be the first in this future—and yet it is death and deathly silence that are alone certain and common to all in this future! How strange that this sole certainty and commonality does almost nothing for people, and that they are *farthest removed* from feeling that they form a brotherhood of death.

Life is full of uncertainty, but the one certainty we have in common we pretend to ignore: that the mortality rate for being human holds steady at exactly 100 percent. Acknowledging this certainty could do much for us, instead of almost nothing, by way of enriching our lives, but our failure to realize the presence of the future unravels the frail fabric of human fraternity.

In a consideration of the modern metropolis reminiscent of Nietzsche’s musings on life in Genoa (with which Nishitani was no doubt familiar), Nishitani invokes a “double vision” of places burgeoning with life, such as the Ginza in Tokyo or Broadway in New York, as being simultaneously “fields of death.” Elaborating a traditional Zen image of skulls lying scattered all over the field of existence, he writes:

A hundred years hence, not one of the people now walking the Ginza will be alive, neither the young nor the old, the men nor the women . . . In a flash of lightning before the mind’s eye, what is to be actual a hundred years hence is already an actuality

today. We can look at the living as they walk full of health down the Ginza and see, in double exposure, a picture of the dead . . . This kind of double exposure is true vision of reality . . . The aspect of life and the aspect of death are equally real, and reality is that which appears now as life and now as death.<sup>36</sup>

This idea is prefigured in Heidegger's discussion of death in relation to life in his essay from 1946, "What Are Poets For?" Central to the discussion is the idea that human beings, as "mortals," are now living "in a destitute time" because they "are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality."<sup>37</sup> Heidegger shows how this theme weaves through the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and cites a sentence from one of the poet's "Letters from Muzot" from 1923, where he recommends regarding death as the hidden back-side of life:

Like the moon, so life surely has a side that is constantly turned away from us, and which is not life's opposite but its completion to perfection, to plenitude, to the truly whole and full sphere and globe of *Being*.<sup>38</sup>

The next sentences from this letter are also worth citing because they anticipate with such eloquent clarity Nishitani's idea of "death-*as*-life, life-*as*-death":<sup>39</sup>

I shall not say that one should *love* death; but one should love life with such magnanimity, and without calculating exceptions, that one involuntarily always includes death (as the averted half of life) and loves it along with life . . . It is thinkable that death stands infinitely nearer to us than life itself.<sup>40</sup>

Although Nishitani claims that the aspects of life and death are equally real, insofar as the acceptance of death opens us to emptiness he will also emphasize that this field opens up "on the near side, more so than what we normally regard as our own self."<sup>41</sup>

In an essay from 1960, "Science and Zen," Nishitani expands his treatment of nihility to cosmic dimensions. He proceeds from the premise that the most profound effect of the rise of the natural sciences in recent centuries has been the destruction of "the teleological worldview," which holds that the world has some purpose to it and is heading toward some end that grants meaning to human existence. The "big picture" presented by the modern scientific worldview is by contrast rather bleak:

<sup>36</sup> Nishitani 1982, 51–52.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 94.

<sup>38</sup> Letter of January 6, 1923, in Rilke Rainer Maria, *Briefe* (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1950), 806; cited by Heidegger in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Nishitani 1982, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Rilke, *Briefe*, 806–807.

<sup>41</sup> Nishitani 1982, 95, 97.

This view sees matter, in its usual state, as subject to conditions that could never serve as an environment for living beings (for example, in conditions of extremely high or extremely low temperatures). The range of the possibility of existence for living beings is like a single dot surrounded by a vast realm of impossibility: one step out of that range and life would immediately perish. Thus, to this way of thinking, the universe in its usual state constitutes a world of death for living beings.<sup>42</sup>

Recent advances in astrobiology confirm Nishitani's claim concerning the extremely narrow range of conditions that can give rise to and support life.<sup>43</sup> As Nietzsche once wrote: "Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is only a species of the dead, and a very rare species at that."<sup>44</sup>

Nishitani then turns, characteristically, to the existential counterpart to the natural scientific account of our situation, which he again presents in a cosmic context:

Directly beneath the field of man's being-in-the-world, and the field of the very possibility of that being, the field of the impossibility of that being has opened up. The field where man has his being is his teleological dwelling place; it is the place where he has his life with a conscious purpose as a rational being. And yet this is disclosed as a field merely floating for a brief moment within a boundless, endless, and meaningless world governed by mechanical laws (in the broad sense of the term) and devoid of any telos. Our human life is established on the base of an abyss of death.<sup>45</sup>

Contemporary natural science, astronomy in particular, has lent considerable depth and weight to the Buddhist insight into impermanence, where any arising takes place in interdependence with perishing in a field of life-and-death, where life is "a very rare species" indeed.

Nishitani goes on to invoke the eschatological myth of the "cosmic conflagration," found in many cultures, remarking that the Buddhists transformed it from a cosmological doctrine into "an existential problem":

Seen from this standpoint, this world as it is—with the sun, the moon, and the numerous stars, with mountains, rivers, trees, and flowers—is, as such, the world ablaze in an all-consuming cosmic conflagration. The end of the world is an actuality here and now; it is a fact and a destiny at work directly underfoot.<sup>46</sup>

In Heidegger's terms, transferred from the individual to the cosmic dimension, death as the "possibility of the absolute impossibility of all possibilities" isn't something in the

<sup>42</sup> Nishitani, in Franck 2004, 109.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, NASA (2003), "Astrobiology Roadmap," 2 (retrieved January 4, 2012, from <http://astrobiology.arc.nasa.gov/roadmap/g1.html>); and K. Kashefi and D. Lovley, "Extending the Upper Temperature Limit for Life," *Science* 301. 5635 (2003): 934.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *The Joyful Science*, aphorism 109; *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, 467, my translation.

<sup>45</sup> Nishitani, in Franck 2004, 110.

<sup>46</sup> Nishitani, in Franck 2004, 117.

future that we need to wait for: it is rather what is “nearest” to us, since death is always “possible at any moment.”<sup>47</sup>

Nishitani allows that the myth of the cosmic conflagration “can also be interpreted in a scientific way,” saying that “it is at least scientifically possible that the planet on which we live . . . and the whole cosmos itself might be turned into a gigantic ball of fire.”<sup>48</sup> Fifty years later we *know* that this is what’s happening to the earth: as the sun proceeds toward its Red Giant phase it will boil off the earth’s atmosphere, before expanding beyond the planet’s orbit to engulf it in a fiery conflagration.<sup>49</sup> The latest models predict that the Earth, even without help from anthropogenic global warming, could fall out of the “habitable zone” in some 1.75 billion years—although our zeal for increasing the rate of global warming could make this happen sooner.<sup>50</sup>

Returning to the field of nihility as experienced by the individual, we find Nishitani characterizing it as a “field of infinite dispersion,” a zone of death because everything, including our selves, is cut off from everything else:

All things appear isolated from one another by an abyss. Each thing has its being as a one-and-only, a solitariness absolutely shut up within itself . . . . On the field of nihility all nexus and unity is broken down and the self-enclosure of things is absolute. All things that are scatter apart from one another endlessly.<sup>51</sup>

It is thus not a place where one can function normally, because the abysses and scattering have a paralyzing effect. And if the scattering makes it hard to walk on the field of nihility, it’s just as hard to talk (and not only about it), since language, too, fails to function.

Seen essentially, that is, as existing in nihility and as manifest in nihility, everything and everyone is nameless, unnamable, and unknowable. Now the reality of this nihility is covered over in an everyday world, which is in its proper element when it traffics in names.<sup>52</sup>

If the idea is to be open to the field of nihility as the way to emptiness, one might wish that Nishitani had described it more fully. (Western philosophers who talk about confronting the abyss, like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, also offer minimal description of the experience.) But before concluding that Nishitani’s field of nihility derives from a peculiarly East Asian experience inaccessible to those who haven’t suffered the Great

<sup>47</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967), §§ 50–53.

<sup>48</sup> Nishitani, in Franck 2004, 118.

<sup>49</sup> K.-P. Schröder and R. C. Smith, “Distant Future of the Sun and Earth Revisited,” *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 3861 (2008): 155–163.

<sup>50</sup> A. Rushby et al., “Habitable Zone Lifetimes of Exoplanets Around Main Sequence Stars,” *Astrobiology* 13.9 (2013): 833–849.

<sup>51</sup> Nishitani 1982, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Nishitani 1982, 101.

Doubt, or Zen sickness, we should consider that Western counterparts are indeed to be found, and described, in the field of literature.

In nihility all is “nameless, unnamable, and unknowable.” It is not for nothing that the third novel in Samuel Beckett’s magnificent trilogy is *The Unnamable*: the entire work (and many passages from other works) can be heard as spoken by a voice, or voices, on the field of nihility.

An earlier, equally magnificent evocation of nihility (with which Nishitani may have been familiar) is to be found in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s famous “Chandos Letter.” In this brief text, purportedly addressed to the philosopher Francis Bacon, the writer explains how he has “completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all.” At first, he had problems with talking about “elevated topics,” where “abstract words . . . disintegrated in my mouth like rotten mushrooms.” But then “the affliction broadened, like spreading rust,” so that people in general and their affairs became impossible to understand:

I could no longer grasp them with the simplifying gaze of habit. Everything came to pieces, the pieces broke into more pieces, and nothing could be encompassed by one idea. Isolated words swam about me; they turned into eyes that stared at me and into which I had to stare back, dizzying whirlpools that spun around and around and led into the void.<sup>53</sup>

After a failed attempt to escape from this condition by immersing himself in the thought of Seneca and Cicero, the writer eventually begins to sense a spontaneous change in his experience, especially with respect to such insignificant things as “a watering can, a harrow left in a field, a dog in the sun, a shabby churchyard, a cripple, a small farmhouse”:

These mute and sometimes inanimate beings rise up before me with such a plentitude, such a presence of love, that my joyful eye finds nothing dead anywhere. Everything seems to mean something . . . I feel a blissful and utterly eternal interplay in me and around me, and amid the to-and-fro there is nothing into which I cannot merge. Then it is as if . . . we could enter into a new, momentous relationship with all of existence if we began to think with our hearts.<sup>54</sup>

This could be a description of the turn from the field of nihility to the field of emptiness, which now allows the author to get, from the heart, to the heart of things.

Nishitani talks about the “transitional” character of nihility, insofar as it is “not a field one can stand on in the proper sense of the term.” If we can’t stand on it, perhaps we just need to stand it, until the turn takes place. Or else take a step. Nishitani writes at one point of “the necessity of having nihility go a step further and convert to śūnyatā . . .

<sup>53</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 121, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Hofmannsthal. *Lord Chandos Letter*, 123, 125.

where emptiness appears at one with being.” But he also talks of a “step back” from nihilism to the field of emptiness, to shed light (a Zen expression) on what is underfoot.<sup>55</sup>

## THE FIELD OF EMPTINESS

It’s not that we can take that further step deliberately, through exercising will—because on the field of nihilism, with the death of the ego, willing is no longer possible. In an early discussion of European nihilism, Nishitani talked of the self-overcoming of nihilism as “a turn”:

This “Nothing,” without God or Truth actually harbored within itself the seeds of a turn to a great affirmation in which existential nothingness replaced God as the creative force.<sup>56</sup>

The self-overcoming of nihilism thus involves staying with the meaninglessness, the Great Doubt, and Death, hanging in there until the turn comes that opens up the field of emptiness. It turns out to be worth the wait, undergoing the nihilism until the self-overcoming takes place.

On the field of emptiness, we experience a complete reversal of the way things were just before:

In contrast to the field of nihilism on which the desolate and bottomless abyss distances even the most intimate of persons or things from one another, on the field of emptiness that absolute breach points directly to a most intimate encounter with everything that exists.<sup>57</sup>

Such intimacy is possible because, on the field of emptiness, we have gone far beyond the superficial encounters we have with things on the field of consciousness, and the network of relationships that make every thing the thing that it is comes to the fore, allowing us to get to the heart of things, to their very “center,” where we can experience them “in their truly elemental and original appearances.”<sup>58</sup>

In this context, Nishitani cites the well-known advice of the haiku poet Bashō to those who aspire to writing about a pine tree or bamboo (which one could as well extend to those who would paint them):

From the pine tree  
learn of the pine tree,  
and from the bamboo  
of the bamboo.

<sup>55</sup> Nishitani 1982, 137, 123; 4. See Davis 2004 for a discussion of the “step back.”

<sup>56</sup> Nishitani 1990, 8; see also 82, 90, 173.

<sup>57</sup> Nishitani 1982, 98, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Nishitani 1982, 130, 140, 110.

Rather than dealing with mere representations on the field of consciousness, we are to undermine the anthropocentric perspective by getting to the heart of the thing and experiencing it from there. (In the case of thinkers like Zhuangzi, or Dōgen, or Nietzsche, we could talk of entering into the perspective of the other.) Nishitani understands Bashō's dictum as an encouragement to shift to

the dimension where things become manifest in their suchness, to attune ourselves to the selfness of the pine tree and the selfness of the bamboo. The Japanese word for "learn" [*narau* 習う] carries the sense of "taking after" something, of making an effort to stand essentially in the same mode of being as the thing one wishes to learn about.<sup>59</sup>

This kind of learning is possible because we exist in a field of dynamic forces that are patterned by what the Buddhists call "dependent co-arising" (or the Daoists "*dao*"):

The field of *śūnyatā* is a field of force. The force of the world makes itself manifest in the force of each and every thing in the world. To return to a terminology adopted earlier on, the force of the world, or "nature" [*physis*], becomes manifest in the pine tree as the *virtus* of the pine, and in the bamboo as the *virtus* of the bamboo. Even the very tiniest thing, to the extent that it "is," displays in its act of being the whole web of circuminsessional interpenetration that links all things together. In its being, we might say, the world "worlds."<sup>60</sup>

Thus, a single pine tree—through its *virtus*, power, 徳 (Ch. *de*; Jp. *toku*)—is not only the center of a world, supported by all other things, or processes, but it also supports and contributes to everything else that's going on. (Readers familiar with Daoism or Neo-Confucianism, Huayan or Tiantai Buddhism, or the later Heidegger's ideas about thing and world, will find Nishitani's discussion aptly reminiscent of those earlier philosophies.) To the extent that we ourselves participate in this wondrous process, we do so not as our selves understood as "some thing," but as ourselves a field: "the self has its being as such a field" (*Dasein* as a clearing; *Lichtung*, in Heidegger).<sup>61</sup>

On the question of how we get to the field of emptiness, Nishitani writes of another way later in *Religion and Nothingness*, in discussing Dōgen's idea of "body-and-mind dropping off": "It is said that we take our leave of the darkness of ignorance exclusively by means of just sitting [*zazen*]."<sup>62</sup> Nishitani seems reluctant to write about *zazen*, perhaps because he regarded his Zen practice and his philosophical thinking as to some extent separate, although complementary, activities. He spoke of himself "thinking and then sitting, sitting and then thinking." But, of course, they needn't be separate, and for

<sup>59</sup> Nishitani 1982, 128.

<sup>60</sup> Nishitani 1982, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Nishitani 1982, 151.

<sup>62</sup> Nishitani 1982, 185.

a thinker like Dōgen, they weren't: "Now sit steadfastly and think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Beyond thinking."<sup>63</sup>

Practice-enlightenment for Dōgen necessarily involves a kind of thinking, but not, of course, anthropocentric conceptual or rational thinking on the field of consciousness. It is a deeper process, like Nietzsche's "it thinks" (*es denkt*) or Heidegger's "meditative thinking"—or what Nishitani calls "existential" thinking, thinking in images or *kōans*, usually drawn from the Chan and Zen traditions. Because such thinking emerges from or through a mortal body, it's a major component of Nishitani's task of practicing philosophy as a matter of life and death. Yet such practice is by no means morbid: Nishitani frequently emphasizes the profound *joy* that eventually attends it. He suggests that the field of emptiness may be accessed through the practice of *zazen* as, in Dōgen's words, "the right entrance to free and unrestricted activity in self-joyous *samādhi*."<sup>64</sup> On this field, the self can ease itself into the joy of the self of the world.

The kind of thinking involved here is not guided by the controlling ego, but by the things themselves as they come and go on the field of emptiness, because these all engage in "preaching the dharma," or expounding the Buddhist teachings:

Things . . . express themselves, and in expressing themselves they give expression, at the same time, to what it is that makes them be, pointing it out and bearing witness to it . . . . The pine speaks the *koto* [matter, *Sache*, *logos*] of the pine tree, the bamboo the *koto* of the bamboo . . . . [They speak from] the place where things are on their own home-ground, just as they are, manifest in their suchness.<sup>65</sup>

Our intimacy with things is enhanced when we not only get to their hearts but also listen to what they have to say to us, as friends and companions on the Way. The only passage from an earlier thinker that Nishitani quotes three times in *Religion and Nothingness* is this one from Dōgen's "Genjōkōan," which intimates the optimal stance toward things:

To practice and confirm all things [dharmas] by conveying one's self to them, is illusion: for all things to advance forward and practice and confirm the self, is enlightenment.<sup>66</sup>

It's a matter of letting things be (in the middle voice of the verb "let"), what Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit* (releasement), so that our thoughts arise from the things themselves.

<sup>63</sup> Heisig 2001, 184; Dōgen, "Recommending Zazen to All People," in Dōgen 2010, 908.

<sup>64</sup> Nishitani 1982, 187–188; see also 199–200, 246–247.

<sup>65</sup> Nishitani 1982, 195. The idea that things "preach the dharma" comes from Kūkai's notion of *hosshin seppō* (法身說法; the Dharmakāya expounds the Dharma), and Dōgen's similar idea of *mujō seppō* (無情說法; insentient beings expound the Dharma). For a discussion of the contemporary significance of these ideas, see Parkes 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Nishitani 1982, 107, 164, 196.

The complex profundity of Dōgen's thought often makes it difficult to fathom, but when he talks to the monks in his monastery about "the great matter," he is straightforward and clear:

It goes without saying that you must consider the inevitability of death. You should be resolved not to waste time and refrain from doing meaningless things. You should spend your time carrying out what is worth doing. Among the things you should do, what is the most important?<sup>67</sup>

These are existential and not moral "shoulds," and the appropriate response to the question addressed to the individual mortal (like the response to Nietzsche's imagistic presentations of eternal recurrence, or Heidegger's existential conception of death) has no predetermined or specific content. In the face of your imminent death, how are you going to live this moment, and the next, and the one after that? Nishitani doesn't explicitly pose Dōgen's question, but it is implicit throughout his discussions of death, and the response is simply: to open oneself to the field of emptiness.

Just before the end, let us entertain a short metaphysical question about Nishitani's three fields philosophy: why the nihility? Why not just experience on the field of consciousness and then leave open the possibility of enlightened existence on the field of emptiness? Why the necessity for the middle nonground, the transitional zone where everything appears as an absolute inversion of the field of emptiness? Why insist, as Nishitani does, on the reality of the abyssal separation and solitude of everything that is ultimately, on the deeper field beneath, so intimately interconnected?

The simple answer: because of death, the radical impermanence of all things. But then the existential-nihilistic question arises: why bother? Why not stay with the field of consciousness, forget about nihility and death, and simply get on with our lives? If it all comes to naught, why not just enjoy life as much as and while we can? Because that way we can miss so much of it and fail to attain breadth or depth in its enjoyment. But if instead we try to live life more fully by opening down to the field of emptiness and engaging other people and things as they are, then, when we reach the end, we may find we can face it with relative serenity—and perhaps even, with Hakuin, "obtain the decisive and ultimate great joy" on the way.

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<sup>67</sup> Dōgen 1987, 97.

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