

# Nothingness in Asian Philosophy

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## **20 Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness**

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## 20 Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness

*Yasuo Deguchi*

A deep and bottomless valley lies within the endless sky. Likewise, nihility lies within emptiness. But in this case, the sky is not only something that stretches far and wide over the valley, but also something within which the earth, we, and countless stars exist and are moving about. It lies under our feet, at a further depth of the bottom of the valley. If the residence of the omnipresent God is heaven, then heaven should also lie at a further depth of bottomless hell. So heaven is a depth for the hell. In the same way, emptiness is a depth for the nihility.<sup>1</sup>

—Keiji Nishitani, *What Is Religion?* 1961/1987a, 110f.

### Introduction

Emptiness (空, *kū*) and Nothingness (無, *mu*) are among the most important philosophical terms in East Asian thoughts. Emptiness, as a philosophical term, has an Indian origin; it is *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, and was formulated in Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly in the *Paramīta sūtras* and the Mādhyamaka school. On the other hand, nothingness came from Chinese Daoism, especially the doctrine of reverence for nothingness (貴無論, *ki mu ron*) in Neo-Daoism (玄學, *gen gaku*).

When the Mahāyāna idea of emptiness was introduced into China, it was sometimes translated and explained as nothingness.<sup>2</sup> Since then, these terms have been largely taken as synonyms in Buddhist philosophical discourse. But some have challenged this common wisdom, and claimed that in certain contexts the two ideas are distinct. For instance, a prominent scholar in the history of Zen Buddhism wrote that nothingness in the Zen tradition had nothing to do with emptiness in the *Paramīta* texts (Yanagida 1984, 196). We thus have cause to ask ourselves the following questions: do emptiness and nothingness differ from each other in meaning, and if so, what is the difference between them, and what significance does this difference have?

These problems become particularly pressing when we examine the philosophy of Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), the most influential postwar Kyoto school philosopher. He changed the key term of his thought from *absolute nothingness*, an expression he inherited from Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), the founder

of the Kyoto school, to *emptiness*, in the middle of one of his major works, *What Is Religion?* (1961/1987a). Despite this apparent shift, however, he didn't explain explicitly whether the two terms were synonymous, why he changed his key term, and what significance this shift had. Naturally, his silence has led some scholars of Nishitani to ask themselves the questions asked above (e.g., Ueda 2004; Hanaoka 2004).<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I will raise these questions, and try to answer them in my own way.

Let me outline my answer to begin. Nishitani didn't articulate any substantial difference between emptiness and nothingness in *What Is Religion?*. The terms are used interchangeably and employed as an *existential category*, as I called it. In other words, the only difference between them still remains nominal in this early work. A substantial difference between the meanings and significance of the difference can only be identified in one of his latest and most important works, "Emptiness and That-Is-Ness" (1982/1987b). But the philosophical importance of this difference cannot be fully understood without taking into account Nishitani's idea of *emotional reconciliation with nihilism* in his essay "On Bashō" (1962/1991a). As this back and forth movement of my arguments from one to the other text suggests, the difference and its significance are not completely spelled out by Nishitani himself. Rather, they are major open questions that he left to us.

### Nishitani as a Mahāyāna Existentialist

In *What Is Religion?* Nishitani tried to establish his own version of existentialism that incorporated traditional ideas of Mahāyāna Buddhism, or *Mahāyāna existentialism*, as I call it, contrasting it with older versions of existentialism found in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, the early Heidegger, and Sartre.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, he reformulated a Mahāyāna idea, *emptiness*, as an existential category. By existential category, I mean both an ontological and epistemological mode of ourselves and our world; that is, a mode of how we and our world exist, and how we know ourselves and the world.

Then what is existentialism? Like Sartre in *Question de méthode* (Sartre 1960/1985, 1), existentialists usually reject any attempt to define their own positions. Nishitani is no exception; he didn't define existentialism. But he roughly characterized it as a philosophical position that puts its "emphasis on subjectivity" (Nishitani 1987a, 64). This characterization qualifies him as an existentialist because he also emphasizes "fundamental subjectivity" (82). Furthermore, from his critical comments on the earlier versions of existentialism, we can extract his ideas of what existentialism ought to be (63ff). According to him, existentialism has to be aware of nihilism as the basis of human existence and the world as a whole, or in other words, to acknowledge the meaninglessness of our existence, our lives, and the entire world, and nevertheless tries to construct its own view of ourselves and the world, as opposed to the scientific objectifying views on them. This is exactly what Nishitani aimed to do in *What Is Religion?*<sup>5</sup> He tried to attain this aim by contrasting three views,

“standpoints,” or existential categories: the category of reason or consciousness; the category of nihility or *karma* (業, *gou*); and the category of emptiness. According to Nishitani, the first category is represented by classical modern Western philosophies, such as Cartesianism and Kantianism, with science as their output. He takes the second category to correspond to the views of Western existentialists such as Nietzsche, the early Heidegger, and Sartre. Since Nishitani takes these existentialists to also be nihilists (108), he takes the second category as the nihilistic worldview. Finally, the third category represents his own position, which is characterized by Mahāyāna ideas such as emptiness.

Why are Mahāyāna ideas taken to exemplify the *third* category? An obvious reason is that Nishitani takes the Mahāyāna worldview to be the truest and most profound one in comparison with the first two, in the sense that those two categories are made possible only on the basis of the Mahāyāna category. At the same time, he cautiously avoided giving a privileged position to Mahāyāna Buddhism by writing that the same category can be seen “to be implied by, not only Buddhism, but all genuine religious lives” (Nishitani 1987a, 289). In his view, these “religious lives” include those of Christians such as Paul (31, 67ff), Eckhart (70–78, 102, 112, 120) and Francesco d’Assisi (310f, 313f). But he also adds that the worldview represented in the third category is “manifested most straightforwardly” (288) or “in a clearer manner” (102) in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and especially in the Zen tradition. So he does give a special status to certain kinds of religious worldviews, and reserves just a relative advantage for Mahāyāna Buddhism.

We can identify yet another reason for Nishitani’s appeal to Mahāyāna ideas. This reason has to do with his strategy for overcoming the older forms of existentialism or nihilism by means of his new version. Any new version of existentialism must be distinct from, and, at least in a sense, superior to the older ones, but at the same time, it should share the same spirit with them. In other words, the new version of existentialism has to criticize some aspects of the older ones while retaining some of their virtues. Nishitani’s appeal to Mahāyāna is appropriate for carrying out this twofold task.

Though having a history of almost two millennia, Mahāyāna Buddhism is a relatively new addition to the Buddhism movement. In its inception, to establish itself as a new and better version of Buddhism, it had to criticize some aspects of an older tradition of Buddhism, Hīnayāna or Theravāda, while accepting its other aspects. In other words, Mahāyāna was established as a dialectical *antithesis* to Hīnayāna. Many Mahāyāna ideas, such as emptiness, were designed to surpass some core ideas of Hīnayāna without violating the original spirit of Buddhism. In this way, Mahāyāna’s relation to Hīnayāna as its archrival is analogous to Nishitani’s stance to the older forms of existentialism. Against this background, Nishitani appropriated Mahāyāna’s position into his own version of existentialism, and consigned Hīnayāna’s thought to the older versions. This amounts to affixing the label “new and superior” to his version of existentialism, while assigning the label “old and inferior” to its previous versions. On the basis of this strategic labeling, the Mahāyāna idea of

emptiness was elevated. In this way, emptiness and other Mahāyāna ideas play a strategically crucial role in his philosophical project, which is to propose a “new and better” version of existentialism that overcomes nihilism.

Nishitani’s strategy also belongs to an established tradition of the Kyoto school; that is, to construct an alternative philosophical position to one or another Western counterpart by means of Mahāyāna ideas, especially those of Zen Buddhism. Nishitani applied this strategy to existentialism, proposing his Mahāyāna existentialism as an alternative to the older versions of existentialism. In effect, he formed an existentialist’s version of Kyoto school philosophy, or, to wit, *existentialized* Kyoto school thought. This *existentialization* of the Kyoto school was so popular among later generations of Kyoto school philosophers that it made Nishitani the most influential postwar Kyoto school figure.

### Three Existential Categories

We shall now sketch Nishitani’s three existential categories. The idea of existential categories had been continuously developing from the earliest chapter to the final one in *What Is Religion?*, and the contents of these categories had steadily grown richer as the chapters advanced. Take an example of this snowballing effect by citing both the earliest and a later description of the category of emptiness. Here is the earliest one.

‘Emptiness’ is the place where we, as concrete human beings, that is, whole individuals, including not only our personalities but also our bodies, realize ourselves as we are, and where everything that surrounds us realizes itself as it is. (Nishitani 1987a, 102)

Next is a description from the latest chapter:

In the place of emptiness, *Dasein* returns to its original phase of “non-Twoness of self and other,” by breaking through “ignorance” as an entire closure-within-self, stands on the basis of non-ego rather than nihilism, and is “non-action” by departing from its infinite drive. In this sense, the place of emptiness is the place of absolute transcendence from time, space and causal necessity, and as a result, the linkage of the “world”. But this absolute transcendence is at the same time an absolute immanence. Within the life-and-death-that-is-enlightenment is real life-and-death and real enlightenment, as noted above, the absolute other side realizes itself only as absolute this side. The place of true emptiness realizes and manifests itself as being united with that dynamic linkage of “being” – “doing” – “becoming” that takes place in “time”, or rather is “time” itself. That is why I said that true *Dasein* is “self” as an emergence from non-ego. *Dasein* is non-“being-in-the-world” while “being-in-the-world,” and it is “being-in-the-world” since it is non-“being-in-the-world.” (292f)

At the beginning, the emptiness category was only about a special manner of human existence and the world's existence; both exist in a way that they realize their original or authentic nature. At the end, however, emptiness had also come to be about the relation of the self or *Dasein*,<sup>6</sup> to other self, action, time, space, causation, and the world. In addition, as an existential category is about the relation of the world to the self, and all that is other than the self. Nishitani wrote that *Dasein*, or the self, "comes into existence as being united with the endless world linkage" (293). Due to this unification, what holds for the self also holds for the world.

Although Nishitani's existential category is about many things, it can be summarized as being about the self and the world, and more specifically, their ontological modes (i.e. how the self and the world exists) and their epistemological modes (i.e. how the self knows itself and the world). By and large, Nishitani's explanations of epistemological modes are based on the ontological ones. For Nishitani, ontology precedes epistemology in the order of explanation.

### 1. The Category of Reason or Consciousness

**Ontological mode:** The self, as a rational person or an ego, confronts the world as an independent object (Nishitani 1987a, 18). This mode of self is well formulated as the Cartesian cognitive agent, *Cogito*, that doubts everything but itself (18) as well as the Kantian autonomous moral agent that has its ground and aim in itself (301).

**Epistemological mode:** The self as a subject knows itself and the world by representing them as objects, and gives them meaning and significance from its standpoint (Nishitani 1987a, 18, 122). So the subject-object dichotomy holds here. Self-consciousness reveals the self as self-contained and being free of fetters from any other authority, including God (42). The self also tries to know the essence of everything, including itself, as self-identical being (22, 129).

### 2. The Category of Nihilty

**Ontological mode:** The self, the world and even God are nullified. In other words nihilty is realized; everything losses its meaning, significance, and even its reality (Nishitani 1987a, 108, 122). Being determined to choose nihilty (62, 99), the self willingly makes itself a nihilty or non-self (108), or in other words, the self as a person or an agency is dissolved into pure volition (Nietzsche) or desire (Sartre) (99). As pure volition or desire, we come to be totally free (42).

**Epistemological mode:** There is neither a knowing subject nor an object to be known (Nishitani 1987a, 123), so the subject-object dichotomy fails to hold here (126). Being without meaning, significance, or existence, everything becomes something strange to us, a pure "question mark" that cannot, in principle, be answered (99, 126). Unlike Cartesian doubt, doubt here is cast even upon oneself. However, only in these negative ways, we, as pure activities, directly encounter or experience ourselves and the world as nihilty (108).

### 3. The Category of Emptiness

**Ontological mode:** The term *realization* (リアリゼーション, *ri a ri zē shon*; or 現成, *gen jō*) is a key component of this category. It was given a double-meaning: manifestation and understanding (Nishitani 1987a, 9). Manifestation is an ontological term, and means that something manifests itself as it is or returns to its authentic, original and fundamental condition (80). On the other hand, understanding is obviously an epistemological term. So in this category, the ontological and epistemological modes are just two sides of the same coin. But for the moment let us focus on the ontological aspect.

According to Nishitani, the ontological realization or manifestation of the self and that of the world are also merely two aspects of one and the same event. This sameness is often rephrased in apparently contradictory expressions such as “the self and the world are absolutely two and absolutely one” (120). Thus, the ontological picture here is *not* simply a monistic or unitary one according to which, while things are different on a superficial level, they are depicted as united in their authentic states. This contradictory or dialethic nature of things in this category can also be identified in Nishitani’s characterization of this category’s counterpart of the essence of things in the category of reason—non-own-nature (無自性, *mu ji shō*). For instance, while the essence of fire is burning, its non-own-nature is burning *and* non-burning (132f). In addition, everything including the self has apparently contradictory properties, for example, death-that-is-life (死即生, *shi soku sei*). In this context, death and life mean pure materiality and personality respectively (106). This doesn’t mean that the self, for instance, is matter in some respect, and a person in another respect. Rather, the self is said to have only apparently inconsistent properties by being both a material thing and being a person. For Nishitani, these apparently contradictory characters reflect the double nature of reality (58f, 202).

The realization of this contradictory nature is also described as a return to, or reappropriation of the original state of affairs (Nishitani 1987a, 102). Unlike the other two categories, only this category of emptiness is approved to be the authentic and fundamental mode of existence of the self and the world. So, the self is not dissolved into the world, but restores its original mode of being, that is, being contradictorily united with the world.

In contrast with the category of nihilism, where every being is nullified, in this category nihilism itself is nullified or *emptified* (Nishitani 1987a, 80). This nullification or *emptification* of nihilism means, of course, the reappropriation of originality; or the this-side-ness (此岸性, *hi gan sei*) in Nishitanian terms. While admitting a nihilistic turn from being to nothingness, Nishitani proposes a return from nothingness to being by introducing the emptiness category (78). He calls the category “the standpoint that transcends the subjective nihilism further towards this side” (110). Similarly, in the place of a nihilistic thesis of non self (which is to view the self as empty), Nishitani claim that emptiness or non-self *is* the self (156), implying a restoration of the self as something that has an apparently contradictory non-own-nature, or own-ness (自體, *ji tai*), as Nishitani calls it, in contrast to substance (實體, *jittai*).



**Epistemological mode:** In this mode, another meaning of realization, or understanding, is central. The understanding in this category is rephrased as “bodily recognition (體認, *tai nin*)” (Nishitani 1987a, 24) or “apprehension (會得, *e toku*)” (183). Citing a phrase of a Japanese Zen master, Dōgen (1200–1253), “everything comes to confirm the self by practice” (Dōgen 1931, 23), Nishitani explained this cognitive mode as follows.<sup>7</sup>

The reality, that is realizing itself as [a Japanese word] *koto* (that has a double meaning of thing and word) transfers itself, as it is and in its essence, to human existence, and human transfers himself to the reality. (Nishitani 1987a, 200f)

Here Nishitani seems to mention a joint practice between human beings and the reality or world, which is to say, *mutual transference*. As one of the above characterizations has it, bodily recognition suggests that the understanding at issue can be taken to be a certain sort of somatic or embodied knowledge that is attained in the course of this joint practice. It is also characterized as *samādhi*, a traditional Buddhist idea for mental concentration in meditation (24, 185). So we can call this cognitive mode *samādhi cognition*.

*Samādhi* cognition is also dubbed “the knowing of non-knowing” (Nishitani 1987a, 174). But this Socratic phrase is meant to refer to the non-cognitive nature of cognition, which is different from its original sense of awareness of ignorance. So cognition in this category also has an apparently contradictory nature as its non-own-nature.

Like many other types of somatic knowledge, it doesn’t make sense to distinguish the knowing subject from the object of knowledge. So the subject-object distinction doesn’t hold here. Furthermore, *samādhi* cognition doesn’t employ any representation of things whatsoever. Being nonobjective and non-representational, *samādhi* cognition is distinct from the epistemic mode of the category of reason.

*Samādhi* cognition can also close the question that nihilism left open, which is, what are the self and the world? The self and the world are now understood as joint practitioners or mutual transferrers that share an apparently contradictory non-own-nature. This closure of the question is a crucial point that distinguishes between nihilistic cognition and *samādhi* cognition.

## Remaining Problems

These three categories remain problematic, nevertheless. In particular, the third one, which represents the worldview of Nishitani’s Mahāyāna existentialism, is not sufficiently explicated. For instance, his characterization of *samādhi* cognition depends too heavily on metaphorical terms such as “interference”. It requires further conceptual clarification in order to lift the mystic fog surrounding the idea of *samādhi*.

Furthermore, this brand of Mahāyāna existentialism cannot decisively clear itself of the suspicion that its alleged contradictions are spurious. As shown above,



a distinctive feature of the emptiness category is that at least some contradictions are taken as true and real. Indeed, Nishitani clearly and unconditionally affirms some contradictions as true—especially ones with regard to two opposing concepts such as life and death.<sup>8</sup> But at least some of those contradictions seem to be dissoluble when we examine them carefully. Take an example of the apparently contradictory non-own-nature of fire: burning and non-burning. It seems quite possible to cancel the apparent contradiction by introducing a parameter, which is to say, a distinction of objects' being burned: the fire doesn't burn itself while it burns something else. Then, we can parameterize away the apparent contradiction. Nishitani takes into account the possibility of this parameterization. His discussion of the non-own-nature of fire began from the remark that mentions the distinction of objects. But he tries to call off the distinction by rephrasing the original remark, so as to come up with a sentence that implies a flat contradiction. It seems that here he is attempting *reverse*-parameterization, as it were.

Unfortunately, Nishitani's attempt doesn't seem to be successful. We can still identify a crucial leap or a lack of argumentation from a contradiction-free sentence to a contradictory one.<sup>9</sup> However, it would be too hasty to declare, based merely on those shortcomings, that Nishitani's entire philosophical project has come to a dead end. Just as the issue of how to differentiate emptiness from nothingness, these are among the main problems that he left for us to solve. We can thus take his unfinished tasks as our own.<sup>10</sup>

## **Mahāyāna Overcoming Nihilism**

Nishitani advocates the third category as being superior to and more profound than the first two. In so doing, he tries to overcome earlier forms of existentialism or nihilism, as these are found in the second category, with his own version of existentialism. To establish the superiority of the category of emptiness, ideas of Buddhism, especially those of Mahāyāna Buddhism, are mobilized. The category of reason is dismissed as a non-Buddhism standpoint, while that of nihilism in both its non-Buddhist and Hīnayāna Buddhism forms is found wanting. The ultimately superior category of emptiness is described as the worldview of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In the category of reason, the self is regarded as self-contained in the sense that it pretends to ground its own existence as a Cartesian ego, and to give the ultimate aim to itself as a Kantian moral agent does. From the Buddhist point of view, Nishitani re-characterized this self-contained nature of the self in a negative manner: "being caught in one's own trap" (Nishitani 1987a, 38), "self-centeredness" (19, 116), "closure-within-the-self" (15), and so on. This category is then curtly dismissed as "attachment to the self" (20, 116). Moreover, in this category, the objects of recognition, that is, the self and the world, are represented and objectified by the self. Even in these apparently indifferent representation and objectification of cognition, Nishitani finds symptoms of greed for, or attachment to, objects (140, 170). This is because, in his view, by representing something as an object, a cognitive agent is already attracted to, or is drawn by it (140).

In a nutshell, Nishitani regards the category of reason as a position of “attachment to self and being” (Nishitani 1987a, 116). In the Buddhist terminology, this means ignorance or delusion (無明, *mu myō*), roaming in life-and-death (生死, *sho ji*), or *saṃsāra*, which is quite opposite of enlightenment (涅槃, *ne han*) or *nirvāṇa*. So he dismisses this category as taking the standpoint of a non-Buddhist who is yet to be enlightened.

By contrast, in the category of nihilism, the self and the world are nullified, and the cognitive dichotomy of subject and object is abandoned. So the attachment to the self and the world appears to vanish from this category. However, Nishitani still senses here a trace of attachment. In this category, the self is dissolved into pure desire or volition. Nishitani rephrases it as “infinite compulsion” (Nishitani 1987a, 244, 260, 270, 275) or “self-will” (275, 276), and characterizes it, by using another Buddhist term, *karma* (業, *gou*), a sinful and fateful act (243, 244, 260, 276). Then he found in the infinite compulsion or karma a vestige of the self, and judged that even this second category was not entirely free from self-centeredness or closure-within-the-self (266, 280, 282). Accordingly, pure volition or desire is also characterized negatively as a product of attachment (271, 280) and ignorance or delusion (274, 280, 282). In this respect, Nishitani finds no substantial difference between the categories of reason and nihilism. The latter is thus also dismissed as remaining at a non-Buddhist level.

On the other hand, however, this category does acknowledge the nihilism for the self and the world. The self and the world are deprived even of their reality, and therefore are neither subjectified nor objectified any longer. This is definitely progress from the non-Buddhist standpoint. Nishitani’s criticism of the resulting standpoint is directed to its attitude toward nihilism rather than the self and the world. He wrote:

[T]here nihilism is still seen from the side of self-existence as a “no-groundness” (*Grundlosigkeit*) that lies at the bottom of self-existence. This means that nihilism is seen outside the self’s existence, and therefore seen as something other than “existence” or something that can be other than “existence.” (Nishitani 1987a, 108)

So, in Nishitani’s eyes, the earlier existentialists or nihilists such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre made a crucial mistake in taking nihilism as an object, or more precisely, in speaking of a nonexistent object. To Nishitani, though free from the objectification of the self and the world, these earlier existentialists were still confined to an objectification of nihilism, and therefore were “captured by nothingness” (109).

Nishitani takes the nihilists’ attitude to nihilism as analogous to Hīnayāna Buddhists’ regard for *nirvāṇa* that had been criticized by Mahāyāna as being “attached to emptiness” (Nishitani 1987a, 39). He continued to say that “the self that set up nothingness, is, in so doing, chained to nothingness and attached to nothingness. In the disguise of the negation of self-attachment, it is, in fact,

a hidden and empowered self-attachment” (39). To him, Hīnayāna Buddhism is not a full-fledged Buddhism. It is an impure alloy between Buddhism and non-Buddhism. This is also his judgment of the nihilistic category as a whole.

Now finally the category of emptiness as articulated by Mahāyāna is elevated above the earlier two categories.

We are usually grounded in the standpoint that sees being merely as being, and is captured by being. Once that standpoint is destroyed and negated, nihilism emerges. The standpoint of nihilism is also the standpoint that sees nothingness merely as nothingness, and is captured by nothingness. That is to say, it is a standpoint that is to be negated again. Then “emptiness,” as the standpoint that disposes such a double capture, and is totally non-attached, comes to emerge. (Nishitani 1987a, 109)

In contrast to the earlier two categories, the emptiness category is affirmed as being free from any attachments to the self and the world, as well as to nihilism, nothingness or emptiness. The self is described as being free from self-attachment, self-centeredness and closure-within-the-self (119, 275). As for emptiness or nothingness, it is taken as emptying the standpoint that represents emptiness as something empty (108), advocating “absolute emptiness” that empties emptiness (40), or implying that “there is no such thing as nothing or true or absolute nothingness” (80). As shown above, the freedom from all sorts of attachments is also described as the restoration of or return to everything’s original states of affairs or its absolute this-side-ness (40, 110, 119).

Among these characterizations of the category of emptiness, we have already been able to identify echoes of Mahāyāna Buddhist terms: emptying emptiness (空空, *kū kū*) and the return to the origin (本源に還る, *hon gen ni kae ru*). In addition, Nishitani characterized these categories by using more explicitly Mahāyāna labels for non-Buddhist, Hīnayāna, and Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas (Nishitani 1987a, 40, 81, 300). For instance, the categories of reason, nihilism, and emptiness are said to be the place of life-and-death, enlightenment, and life-and-death-that-is-enlightenment (300).

None of these Buddhist terms is value-free. They incorporate the idea that non-attachment is valuable, and it is on that basis that Mahāyāna is taken to be the highest category, Hīnayāna comes second, and non-Buddhism is ranked at bottom. But, of course, we are not obligated to endorse the Mahāyāna values. So Nishitani needs to provide us some independent reason for the superiority of his own category. He seems to have two reasons, a practical and a theoretical one.

According to Nishitani, the categories of reason and nihilism have given rise to severe problems for the modern world; they jointly have threatened human values in various ways. Why? First, the category of reason gave birth to, among other things, scientism, according to which only science can provide us with *the* true picture of the world, while philosophy, religion and art cannot (Nishitani 1987a, 88). The scientific picture of the world is purely mechanistic and

totally indifferent to human values (69). In consequence, the grounds of those latter values are severely undermined. On the other hand, the category of nihilism dissected the rational self, which was thought to be a source of human values, into an agent of pure desire. Then, once we obtain technology that has been enhanced by science, we tend to “overdose on it,” so to speak, to meet our desires. As a result, the science and technology driven by our restless desire has over-mechanized human life, society and our culture, making them meaningless, alienating many individuals, and threatening human values (96, 97ff, 100). Consequently, to root out those practical predicaments, we need to overcome or at least modify those categories through the category of emptiness, which, according to Nishitani, does not threaten human values.

Nishitani also has a theoretical reason for preferring his category of emptiness to the other two. He wrote:

The place of nihilism greatly transcends the place of consciousness, where the confrontation between materialism and idealism holds. Needless to say, the place of emptiness is the only one where the depth of nihilism can be found at all. Hence, neither the place of consciousness nor that of nihilism can be realized if it is alienated from that of emptiness. Everything is, in emptiness, in its truly original and profound phase, prior to its phase of being objectified as external existence and prior to its more profound phase of being nullified. At the place of emptiness, things are truly as they originally are. And at the same time, at emptiness as the absolute this side, truly original and profound knowledge takes place, prior to the consciousness of objects and prior to the cognition of existence on the basis of nihilism. (Nishitani 1987a, 123f)

Here, Nishitani seems to claim that the emptiness category makes the other two possible, and is therefore more fundamental than they are. But why? His answer might be that the emptiness category expresses the original and profound states of affairs while the others do not. But this is obviously a poor answer because it leads him to asserting a tautology—since the emptiness category is profound, it must be profound. However, we can rescue him from this tautology by appealing to the virtue of the Mahāyāna category of emptiness—non-attachment or detachment. Take the two opposing concepts that are mentioned in the above citation: *the material* and *the ideal*. Both of them commonly presuppose a more universal concept: say, *being*. Or, we might say, each member of the opposing pair is one specification of the universal concept. The material is a certain sort of being, specifically, a spatiotemporal being, while the ideal is another sort of being, specifically, a non-spatiotemporal being. Conversely, the universal concept itself is unspecified or undetermined with respect to the choice between those specifications. In terms of the Mahāyāna virtue, it is detached from, or not attached to, the choice between the opposing pair. Then here is a crucial thesis that is implicit in Nishitani’s passage: the pair is obtained or generated *only* through the specifications of the non-attached concept, and in this sense

the latter makes the former possible, and therefore is more fundamental. The most unspecified, and totally detached concept is *emptiness*, or *absolute emptiness*. So it makes other key concepts of the earlier categories possible. Therefore, the emptiness category is the most profound among the three. Of course, the thesis is highly contentious. But it is, I think, one of Nishitani's important insights that are inspired by Mahāyāna ideas. And by making it explicit, we can save him from postulating the above tautology since he provides a theoretical reason for the superiority of the emptiness category.

Even though the category of emptiness is practically more preferable and theoretically more profound than the other two, Nishitani doesn't dismiss the latter two as simply false. In contrast, he admits that those two categories also express how things are and how they come to be known. He wrote that we could occasionally adopt one category or another, or shift our worldview from one to another (Nishitani 1987a, 300). So he doesn't take eliminative reductionism according to which the other two categories should be abandoned or reduced to the emptiness category. Rather, his approach is pluralistic in that each category is our genuine view of the self and the world.

### Mahāyāna Backgrounds of Emptiness

Nishitani's emptiness has various Mahāyāna backgrounds. Among them, as he admitted, influences from Zen texts, especially Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, are dominant (Nishitani 1987a, 288). But we can also find that many other Mahāyāna sources were used to characterize one or another aspect of his emptiness. Those include Nāgārjunian terms such as *non-own-nature* and Tientai terms such as *life-and-death-that-is-enlightenment*. Nishitani borrowed some phrases for the contradictory character of *non-own-nature* such as "since the fire is not fire, therefore it is fire" from the *Diamond Pramīta Sūtra* (133). He also referred to Huayan terms such as "one is all, and all is one," "the net of Indra," and "intercommunion (回互, *ego*)" to describe the relation between the self and the world. (114, 168f, 184).

Notably, Nishitanian emptiness has Sanlun flavors. Sanlun combined emptiness with another Mahāyāna idea, *Buddhahood* (佛性, *bussō*), that had been interpreted in terms of Daoism as *the original state of affairs*. So for Sanlun, emptiness means *the return to, or reappropriation of, the original state of affairs* (Jizang 1927, 35). Also in a Sanlun text, we can find one of the clearest expressions of the idea of *emptying emptiness* (Jizang 1926, 326). Furthermore, another Sanlun text, *Da Sheng Xuan Lun* (大乘玄論), mentioned double contradictions such as "non-Being and non-Nothingness and Being and Nothingness" (Jizang 1927, 18). Thus there are remarkable similarities between Sanlun's and Nishitani's ideas. Though he didn't mention Sanlun at all, it is a hidden but significant source of Nishitani's emptiness. In any case, Nishitani's emptiness has diverse Mahāyāna backgrounds that form a gently gathered constellation rather than a tightly united system.

## **The Nominal Difference between Emptiness and Nothingness**

Let us go back to the problem of the difference between emptiness and nothingness. In *What Is Religion?*, the term “nothingness” appeared first, and the term “emptiness” entered the stage later. But references to the latter eventually outnumbered those to the former. So we can witness a shift in the key term in this text. Despite of this apparent change, these two words continue to be used interchangeably throughout the text. Take some examples. “The standpoint of absolute nothingness” was used as a synonym for “the standpoint of emptiness” (Nishitani 1987a, 107, 144). The term “absolute emptiness” was mentioned in place of “absolute nothingness” (137). So, in *What Is Religion?*, in which emptiness made its debut as the key word of Nishitani’s philosophy, its difference from nothingness still remains merely nominal rather than substantial.

Then why did Nishitani prefer ‘emptiness’ to ‘nothingness’ in the later part of *What Is Religion?* The answer seems rather obvious. Throughout the book, he intended to contrast the category of emptiness with that of nihilism. So he needed to make clear the difference between emptiness/nothingness and nihilism. But the term nihilism originated from a Latin word for nothingness, *nihil*. To avoid possible confusions between his stance and that of nihilists, he gradually shifted his key term from nothingness to emptiness.

Before leaving *What Is Religion?*, let me summarize what emptiness/nothingness means in this text. As the above discussion suggests, Nishitani didn’t define these terms clearly while characterizing them in various ways. This is not a symptom of Nishitani’s lack of intellectual clarity. Rather, we should understand that “emptiness” is used in a way that renounces any attempt at precise definition. It is a symbolic name for, rather than an accurate description of, his own existential category, that is, his ontological and epistemological worldview. As with any other worldview, Nishitani’s category of emptiness is so comprehensive that it has many aspects. By focusing on one or another aspect, we can summarize the category with one or another term or phrase such as realization, non-own-nature, the original state of affairs or intercommunion. Which term is to be used depends on which aspect one wants to highlight. So there is no single optimal way to characterize or summarize the category. Then why was “emptiness” rather than the other terms selected as its symbolic name? A possible answer is that the category was inspired, mainly or in a relatively conspicuous manner, by emptiness as formulated in traditional Mahāyāna thought. But the historical sources of Nishitanian emptiness are again so diverse and rich that they cannot be summarized in a single characterization without doing harm to their multiplicity. The best we can do is, as we have tried, to enumerate his characterizations of the category of emptiness.

## **Two Sorts of Emptiness in a Later Work**

In searching for a substantial difference between Nishitanian emptiness and nothingness, let us now turn to one of his latest and most important works,



“Emptiness and That-Is-ness” (or *E&T*) (1982/1987b). In this work, Nishitani introduced an important distinction into his idea of emptiness: doctrinal emptiness (法義の空, *hougi no kū*) and emotive/volitional emptiness (情意的空, *jōi teki kū*), from which, I shall claim, we can find a clue for thinking of a substantial differentiation between emptiness and nothingness.

Before examining these two kinds of emptiness, let us undertake a brief overview of the general feature of Nishitani’s final position in *E&T*. As before, Nishitani set up three existential categories here: the category of science, of art, and of religion, as I call them. Each of those categories represents the scientific, the artistic, and the religious worldview respectively. While the first one corresponds to the category of reason in *What Is Religion?*, the latter two can be seen as new versions of the category of emptiness. Specifically, in *E&T*, while the category of emptiness splits off into two layers, the former category of nihilism disappears. This means that nihilism and any attempt to overcome it appear to vanish out of Nishitani’s sight. Actually he didn’t even mention nihilism or nihilism in this culminating paper at all.

Now let us turn to these two kinds of emptiness in *E&T*. Doctrinal emptiness should be understood as the doctrinal formulations of emptiness in the history of the Buddhist philosophical traditions (Nishitani 1987b, 113). Nishitani didn’t specify which ideas these were, but they should coincide with the Mahāyāna sources for the category of emptiness outlined above. On the other hand, emotive/volitional emptiness is also called emptiness as it is experienced in emotion and volition (情意, *jōi*), and is said to be the artistic *image* that is a counterpart expression of the doctrinal emptiness. Nishitani takes these artistic images to be typically represented in Chinese and Japanese art forms such as painting and poetry (112, 113).

Although the typical examples of emotive/volitional emptiness can be found in artistic works, Nishitani seems to maintain that its archetypical instance or prototype is our visual image of the sky (Nishitani 1987b, 111f). For instance, he wrote that even in a classical Chinese poem that describes the tranquil atmosphere of a Zen monk’s villa, we could still appreciate the reflections on or associations made with the image of the sky (113). Nishitani’s thought can be understood as meaning that we originally obtained images (rather than ideas or concepts) of emptiness from viewing the sky, and then either those images permeate one or another artistic work, or, in other words, we project one or another image of emptiness that is prototypically produced by the sky unwittingly onto some paintings or poems.

But why the sky? Nishitani seems to appeal to a linguistic fact that the Chinese word for emptiness, 空 (*kū*), has a double-meaning: emptiness (or being empty) and the sky. This double-meaning is not to be taken as a case of a homonym in which two meanings just accidentally share the same pronunciation or character. Rather, it is an example of polysemy in which two meanings have a common etymological origin, “hole” in this case. However, this shared origin between emptiness and the sky is more or less a local linguistic phenomenon. It doesn’t hold for, among other languages, Sanskrit, Japanese, and English. While the Sanskrit word for empty is *śūnyā*, the one for the sky or air is *ākāśa*,



for instance.<sup>11</sup> So among the major languages in which Mahāyāna Buddhism has long established itself, the double-meaning between emptiness and the sky is limited to Chinese only. But in the Sinosphere, which includes Japan and Korea, this double-meaning is widely recognized and accepted.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Nishitani's identification of the image of the sky as the archetype of emotive/volitional emptiness relies on this local linguistic phenomenon.

### **A Historical Source of the Emotive/Volitional Emptiness**

The term 'sky' has been traditionally used as a metaphor or even a synonym for emptiness. We can find its eye-catching example in the chapter on the sky (虚空, *kokū*) in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. The whole chapter was inspired by a poem of Dōgen's mentor, Rú Jīng (如淨), a Chinese Zen master. In his verse, Rú Jīng mentioned a wind-bell, whose entire body looked like a mouth, hanging in the sky. Dōgen modified his master's phrase describing this bell as "the entire body of the sky hanging in the sky (虚空ノ渾身ハ虚空ニカカレリ, *kokū no unshin wa kokū ni kakareri*)" (Dōgen 1931, 259). Through this rephrasing, he seems to mean not only that the wind-bell hangs against the background of the sky, but also that the wind-bell itself is the sky. For Dōgen, this is also the case for everything else, including the self and all that is other than the self. The self and everything else is the sky. Obviously, he used the word "sky" as a metaphor or, more straightforwardly speaking, a synonym for emptiness. So by talking about the sky, Dōgen effectively meant that everything was empty. But on the other hand, he clearly distinguished the sky from the Mahāyāna ideas or doctrines of emptiness (258). For him, the poetic image of the sky connotes emptiness, but emptiness is not to be reduced to its doctrinal dimensions. Here we can find a germ for Nishitani's idea of emotive/volitional emptiness that is expressed in artistic works such as poems, originating from the image of the sky, and which is to be distinguished from doctrinal emptiness.

Curiously, Nishitani never mentioned either Rú Jīng's poem or Dōgen's chapter on the sky. But it seems obvious that he followed the Rú Jīng–Dōgen tradition when he occasionally evoked metaphors of the sky in *What Is Religion?* (Nishitani 1987a, 164, 240) Among them is the epigraph that opened this chapter. While it is a metaphor for his idea that emptiness is more profound than nihilism, from its key insight that the sky exists everywhere, enveloping everything within itself, we can clearly hear an echo of the sounds that the wind-bell of Rú Jīng and Dōgen still makes.

### **Nishitanian Image as an Integrated Representation**

Nishitani imputed a special meaning to *image*. As he wrote that image is "originally inseparable from what is visible" (Nishitani 1987b, 156), we may take visual perception to be the origin or at least an essential element of image. But the Nishitanian image has many other elements; it is considered to be an integrated representation that consists of common sense, emotion

and volition. By “common sense,” Nishitani draws on an Aristotelian idea, the *sensus communis*, which mixes different forms of sense perception. For example, a common sense of cicadas combines the acoustic perceptions of their chorus with the visual perceptions of their shapes (153f). Furthermore, the Nishitanian image is not emotionally and volitionally transparent or neutral, but is painted with emotion and volition. Image always has emotional and volitional dimensions (159). So the image of cicadas involves not only the above-mentioned common sense but also an emotion together with volition, for example, lamenting for another passing summer and willing idly to stop the lapse of time. Indeed, the compound word emotion/volition means a unification of emotion and volition. This means that the archetypical emotive/volitional emptiness, the image of the sky, should also be an integrated representation, and have its emotional and volitional elements as well as synthetic perceptual ones.

We may ask: What synthetic sense perception does the image of the sky contain? The answer would vary with weather and climate. By characterizing the sky as a “space that has an interminable expanse and an unlimited depth” (Nishitani 1987b, 111), Nishitani obviously was thinking of the crystal clear sky. So this should give us a combination of a bright, deep blue visual image, a refreshing somatic feeling for breathing fresh air, and so on. Then what emotion and volition does the image of the clear blue sky provoke in us? Letting its volitional element aside for the time being, let us explore what emotion or feeling is associated with the sky? According to Nishitani, it provokes in us, on the one hand, some negative feelings such as those of futility, vanity and despair at the transient (114). On the other hand, citing Chinese and Japanese poems that, for him, reflect the image of the sky, Nishitani tries to read between the lines a breathtaking feeling for a panoramic view, a relaxed feeling in an open space (144), a relief from suffering, and even a feeling of mutual understanding and cooperation between correspondents (117). These associations are definitely not negative. Rather, they are positive, having a tint of pleasantness, pleasure and joy. So, in Nishitani’s eyes, the image of the sky stirs mixed feeling in us that have both negative and positive sides. As mixed, they are far from either plainly negative feelings such as grief, sorrow or rage or clearly positive ones such as zeal, enthusiasm, or rapture. The accumulated feeling is rather calm and stabilized. Though calm, its overall tone is still not totally balanced between negative and positive feelings. It slightly inclines toward the positive side: warm rather than cold, bittersweet rather than simply bitter. So let us call this mixed feeling a *warm* feeling.

On the image of the sky, Nishitani wrote:

The sky [as an image] appears in sensations, perceptions and feelings in everyday life as a momentum that determines them, gives certain specific characterizations to the sensuous and the emotive/volitional. (Nishitani 1987b, 117)

In his conception, the image of the sky is not only the prototype of a certain sort of artistic images, but also of a certain sort of image in general that we experience in everyday occasions. It is the origin of a particular kind of combined representation that consists in, among other things, the warm feeling mentioned above. Although having the warm feeling in common, those artistic and everyday images vary with each other in one or another way. They can have different sense perceptions and volitions. But at any rate they have the image of the sky as their archetype. Or they are variations upon the archetype as their theme.

Let us then redefine emotive/volitional emptiness as a certain sort of artistic and everyday life image that shares the warm feeling and are variations of the image of the sky as their prototype.

### **A Substantial Difference between Emptiness and Nothingness**

We are now ready to make explicit a substantial distinction between *emptiness* and *nothingness* that Nishitani implies; that is, while there is emotive/volitional *emptiness*, there is no such a thing as emotive/volitional *nothingness*. Let me outline an argument for this contrast between emptiness and nothingness, by using Nishitani's ideas about the emotive/volitional emptiness.

1. The term "emptiness" means the sky. The sky is directly visual and invokes the warm feeling.
2. So for emptiness, there is something visual and the warm feeling invocative that can be the origin of its prototypical image— here, the image of the sky.
3. On the other hand, the term "nothingness" doesn't have a meaning that signifies anything directly visible and the warm feeling invocative.
4. So for nothingness, there isn't something directly visual and the warm feeling invocative that can be the origin of its prototypical image—that is, there is no counterpart of the image of the sky.
5. Therefore, there are no such things as prototypical images of nothingness and an emotive/volitional nothingness that might originate from the prototype.
6. There is thus a substantial difference between emptiness and nothingness: emptiness has its proper image, that is, emotive/volitional emptiness, whereas nothingness does not.

In *What Is Religion?* Nishitani made no substantive difference between emptiness and nothingness as existential categories. Why? An easy speculation is that he didn't discern any significant difference between the traditional Mahāyāna ideas of emptiness and nothingness. The traditional concept or idea of emptiness corresponds to the doctrinal emptiness in *E&T*. Also, we can rephrase the traditional idea of nothingness as *doctrinal nothingness*.

Consequently, for him there should be no substantial difference between doctrinal emptiness and doctrinal nothingness. They can be used interchangeably. The difference between emptiness and nothingness lies only at the level of the image, but not at the level of ideas or concepts.

Let me sum up Nishitani's view of the difference between emptiness and nothingness. At the level of traditional ideas or concepts, there is no difference between them. Whenever he talks about doctrinal emptiness, he should also mean doctrinal nothingness because they are taken as simply equivalent. On the other hand, while we have emotive/volitional emptiness, that is, the image that shares one or another warm feeling and has, among others, one or another volition, there is no such thing as emotive/volitional nothingness, because while we have a prototypical image of the former in the image of the sky, we lack a prototypical image for the latter. This crucial asymmetry at the image level, however, relies on a local linguistic fact that the Chinese words for emptiness and for sky have the same etymology. So this difference between *emptiness* and *nothingness* holds only locally in the Sinosphere.

### The Calligraphy of the Circle

One might challenge the above argument by appealing to some artistic works that appear to represent the image of nothingness, which can therefore be counted as examples of representations of emotive/volitional nothingness. A typical instance in the Zen tradition is the Chinese ink painting or calligraphy of the circle (円相, *en sou*) (Figure 1). This work of calligraphy appears to be designed to provide us with an image of nothingness. Let us first try to explain the image-making process of this picture, without taking into account the image of the sky or emptiness.

The main device for the image-production here, I claim, is a double *Gestalt* switch with an intellectual guidance. At the outset, when we face the painting, we plainly have a visual perception of a circle, but not of nothingness. Then, we are invited to undergo a double *Gestalt* switch, one of which is visual and the other emotional. The visual *Gestalt* switch is a shift in the objects of our visualization from the black ink circle to the blank space inside it. This shift is usually triggered or guided by one or another verse that is typically affixed to the circle. As its example, we can read in Figure 1 a part of a commonly cited phrase from Sū Dōng Pō (蘇東坡), an eleventh century Chinese Zen poet: "Having-nothing contains unlimited things that include a flower, a moon, and a tower."<sup>13</sup> This phrase directs the viewer to recognize that the space inside the circle or the absence of black ink in that space is meant to be a symbol of nothingness.

The emotional *Gestalt* switch is a change of the objects of our emotion from the circle to the inner space. The round shape of the circle and its deliberately naïve brush strokes are intended to provoke an agreeable and heartwarming feeling within us. Then this positive feeling is transported, to the inner space. Consequently, we begin to entertain a positive feeling toward it. In this way,

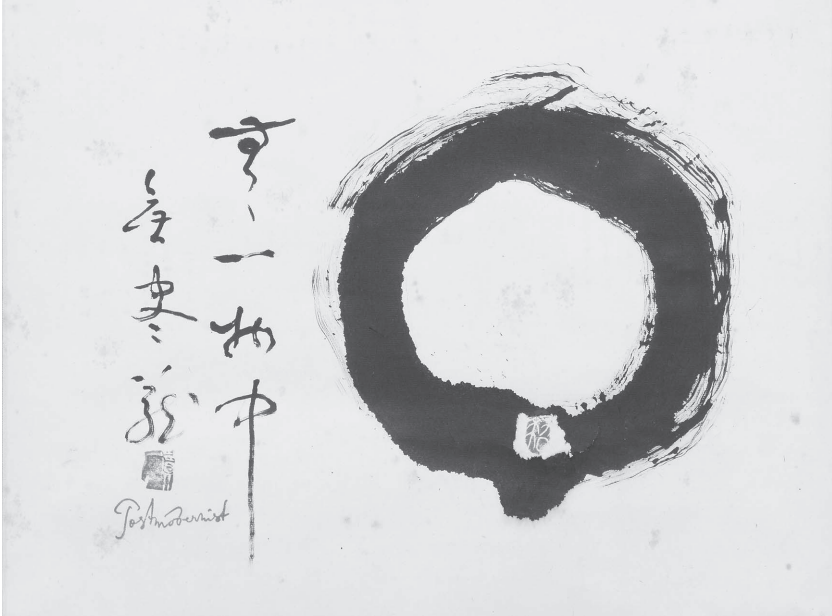


Figure 1. Calligraphy of a circle (円相, *en sou*) by a Kyoto school philosopher, Shinichi Hisamatsu (1889–1980). Copyright: Hisamatsu Shinichi Memorial Museum

we come to have an integrated image of nothingness that consists of, among other things, a visual perception of the absence of black ink and this new, positive feeling.

However, this explanation is unsatisfactory. For instance, it is not clear why and how the emotional *Gestalt* switch takes place. It remains unexplained why we can so readily transport our positive feeling for the circle to the inner space. Even though we feel the circle as agreeable, we have no reason or motivation to feel the *nothingness* as agreeable. The visual perception of the absence tells us nothing about its emotional aspects. Furthermore, the intellectual guidance doesn't have any implications for our feeling for the nothingness that contains everything within it. In contrast to the Nishitanian integrated image, a mere perception or thought is not integrated, and does not convey any information about our emotion or feeling for the objects.

So we need another factor, missing in the above explanation, that can provide us with information about not only the perceptual but also the emotive side of the object. What is this factor? Nishitani's answer is the image. To make the emotional *Gestalt* switch work, we need an image that is at our disposal prior to the switch. In other words, the production of an image requires a prior image. In Nishitani's own words, "The image should have its own independent mode of being, its own inherent origin" (Nishitani 1987b, 158).

This consideration would lead us to an infinite regress, however, unless there is at least one original image to stop the regress. The image of the sky can be

this regress-stopper. We can entertain it without any prior image whenever we look up to the clear sky. That is why it is archetypal. So the image of the sky (or one or another images of emptiness that have been produced by it) should be mobilized to allow the picture of the circle to produce the image of nothingness. In other words, in this picture of the circle or any other artistic works that appear to produce the image of nothingness, the image of the sky or another image of emptiness is smuggled into, or we are invited to project one or another image of emptiness onto, those artistic works. The agreeable feeling that we have for the inner space is a warm feeling originated from the image of the sky. The image we obtain from the calligraphy of the circle is nothing but one of variations of the image of the sky. Shortly, it is a disguised image of emptiness rather than the image of nothingness.

But there still remains a problem: Why is the image of sky projected into the picture of the circle so readily and so smoothly? Nishitani might answer this question by appealing to the equivalence between doctrinal emptiness and doctrinal nothingness. As noted above, in *What Is Religion?*, he didn't make any substantial distinction between emptiness and nothingness and gave no explicit reason for this conflation. An easy speculation is that he didn't discern any substantial difference between the traditional Mahāyāna ideas of emptiness and nothingness. In other words, for him, doctrinal emptiness and nothingness are interchangeable.

Since the traditional ideas of emptiness and nothingness are interchangeable, the term "nothingness" that appears in the verse can be easily be read to mean "emptiness" by those within the Mahāyāna tradition. Now the intellectual guidance for taking the inner blank space as a symbol of nothingness is recast as one for taking it as a symbol of emptiness. We are ready to project onto the picture of the circle the prototypical image of the sky that we have already acquired.

Nishitani could also remind us that in the Zen tradition the circle was originally associated with the sky. In one of its oldest texts, *Faith Mind Inscription* (信心銘, *shin jin mei*), that is conventionally ascribed to the third patriarch of Chinese Zen tradition, Sēng Càn (僧璨), the circle was mentioned as a property of the sky, or precisely speaking, a common property of the sky and our mind (Sēng Càn 1928, 376).<sup>14</sup> So, Nishitani could continue, the sky image could be more readily projected onto the calligraphy of the circle by anyone who was familiar with this historical episode. At any rate, in his view the circle is actually a "window to the sky," and through the round window people look up and feel the sky whenever they appreciate the calligraphy.

### **Emotive/Volitional Reconciliation with Nihilism<sup>15</sup>**

The difference between emptiness and nothingness turns out to be of philosophical significance when we take into account Nishitani's emotional reconciliation, as I call it, with the nihilism or the older versions of existentialism. It can be found in his essay "On Bashō" (1962/1991a), and we can take this work to represent an alternative to his attempt of overcoming nihilism in *What Is Religion?*<sup>16</sup>

In my view, Nishitani's emotional reconciliation takes place in three stages. In the first stage, nihilism is emotionalized or volitionized, so to speak. In this essay, Nishitani suggests that nihilism has two aspects. One is the aspect that can be articulated in ideas or concepts such as groundlessness and transience. The other is the aspect that can be expressed as 'moods' (Nishitani 1991a, 71, 74), 'senses' (73, 74), or such feelings as 'bottomlessness,' 'vain,' and 'sorrow.' (74) But moods, senses, or feelings mentioned here are not to be taken as mere "emotions." They also have to incorporate "a sort of resolution . . . [or] decision to accept the transient thoroughly as it is" (78). The mood is nothing but an emotion that is united with the volition not to escape from the transient or nihilism. What Nishitani emphasizes here is to come to grips with nihilism as an emotion/volition, as experienced in such things as the feeling of bottomlessness, or in other words, to entertain deliberately an emotion/volition of nihilism rather than to have merely "concepts" of nihilism. What happens here can be described as the emergence of nihilism as an emotion/volition or the emotionalization/volitionalization of nihilism. This is not, however, the objectification of nihilism which Nishitani condemned the nihilists for committing. Rather, the nihilism here becomes a genuine aspect, which is to say, the emotive/volitional aspect of our existence.

On the insights of Bashō, a great master of Haiku, into the transient, Nishitani wrote, "something like affection as well as a deep feeling of sorrow, or shortly warmth, adds to the bottomless transient." As a result, he continued, "the feeling of deep sorrow and the feeling of affection are connected in an inseparable manner." And this brings about, he said, "an attitude to genuinely accept as *it is* even what cannot really be affirmed [such as nihilism or the transient]" (Nishitani 1991a, 74) or "an attitude to accept and comply with the transient being as it is, and to give affection to it" (73).

What Nishitani wrote here can be summarized as a two-staged conversion of emotion/volition that corresponds to our second and third stages. The second is the stage at which we deliberately combine the emotion/volition of nihilism in such feelings as bottomlessness or sorrow with one or another positive emotion/volition such as affection or mercy. And finally, at the third stage, a new emotion/volition will emerge from the combination or fusion of these two sorts of emotion/volition. Since the additional emotion/volition is a positive one rather than a negative one, such as hatred and hostility, the combined or fused emotion/volition has a character of reconciliation or amicable settlement with nihilism or the transient. So let us call this emotion/volition that is the end product of this conversion process a *reconciling* one. As this reconciling emotion/volition occupies our minds, we come to be inclined to accept or comply with nihilism.

This is a process of the conversion of emotion/volition from that of nihilism to that of reconciliation. But it can also be interpreted as a way of dealing with nihilism or the older forms of existentialism. In this manner of dealing with nihilism, nihilism is firstly made an emotion/volition, then by being fused with a positive feeling, it is transformed into a reconciling one, and finally we come to be ready



to comply with nihilism. What happens here is not a conceptual analysis or argumentation, but rather a progression or deepening of our emotion/volition. Furthermore, what is attained here is reconciliation with nihilism rather than overcoming it. So let us call this final dealing with nihilism an emotive/volitional (or in short, emotional) reconciliation with nihilism.

As Nishitani admitted, in *What Is Religion?*, he approached emptiness only from the intellectual point of view, setting aside its emotional or emotive/volitional aspect.<sup>17</sup> Thus his strategy for overcoming nihilism or the earlier forms of existentialism is, as shown above, purely intellectual. It is nothing but a manipulation of ideas; labeling the Mahāyāna ideas his own position while affixing the tags of Hīnayāna and non-Buddhist thought to nihilism. So, though not fully explored by him, the emotive/volitional reconciliation with nihilism in “On Bashō” is quite distinct from what he attempted in *What Is Religion?*, and has its own significance.

### The Mature Stage of Nishitani’s Existentialism

We can resolve the reconciling emotion/volition into its emotional and volitional aspects; emotion or feeling of friendliness and volition to reconcile. The feeling of friendliness here is not a simply positive emotion such as that of unconditional cordiality. Instead it has to be a slightly positive feeling because it is about amicable settlement or reconciliation with *the irreconcilable*. So it is an example of the warm feeling mentioned earlier. Since the warm feeling is the hallmark of the image of emptiness, we can say that the reconciling emotion/volition is nothing but one of many variations of the image of the sky or a variant of emotive/volitional emptiness mentioned in *E&T*. This means that the volition for reconciliation is a nice example of volition that can be associated to the image of the sky and its variations.

Being put in the context of how to deal with nihilism, the prototypical image of the sky can function as a powerful tool for reconciliation with nihilism. By fostering the image of emptiness or emotive/volitional emptiness in our minds, we are enabled to attend decisively to nihilism with mercy and affection, and to attain an emotional reconciliation with it, rather than to refute or repudiate it. In other words, we can embrace nihilism with the image of the sky or emptiness.

At the time of the composition of *E&T*, Nishitani had already achieved the emotive/volitional reconciliation with nihilism. This may explain why reference to nihility and nihilism disappeared altogether in this work. Possibly he felt no need to overcome it any longer, so left it simply unmentioned.

The emotive/volitional side of emptiness is crucial for Nishitani’s final attitude toward nihilism or the older existentialisms. Since, as shown above, nothingness lacks an emotive/volitional side, it can play no part in the emotional reconciliation. The reconciliation can be attained only by emptiness, and not by nothingness. Here we can identify a decisive difference between them.

In comparison to the overcoming of nihilism, the emotional reconciliation can have two kinds of significance, if not advantages over it. First, the human being is a being with emotion and volition. So as far as existentialism aims to provide a view on how human beings and their world are, it is obliged to take into account our emotional and volitional depths and our emotive and volitional attitudes toward the world. Actually, a number of existentialists have discussed those issues. But, as mentioned above, in *What Is Religion?*, Nishitani only talked about our cognition and cognitive stance toward the world. In this respect, his Mahāyāna existentialism suffered an obvious omission in comparison to its predecessors. His ideas of emotive/volitional emptiness and emotional reconciliation with nihilism can plug up this philosophical hole, by adding emotional and volitional dimensions to his existentialism. In brief, they can make Nishitani's Mahāyāna existentialism more fully fledged than it otherwise would be.

In his retrospective essay on his adolescence, Nishitani allegorized himself as "a large elm tree that was injected with poison," and suggested that he had shared "the melancholy of the tree that was stung to its very core by a poisonous needle, and the solitude of the tree that fought with the fatal liquids that were poured into its blood vessels" (Nishitani 1950/1990, 179). By the poison mentioned here, Nishitani meant nihilism or nihilism. For the young Nishitani, nihilism had been an abominable threat that could only be properly compared with poison. In his wording, "overcoming nihilism," we can read a nuance of a showdown with nihilism that is rooted in his personal aversion to it.

By contrast, in emotive/volitional reconciliation, such a confrontational attitude vanishes. Nihilism or nihilism has come to be taken as a partner in reconciliation. We can imagine that elder Nishitani had been modifying or weakening his longstanding hatred of nihilism. Like an old person who feels attachment, as a part of his body, even to a nidus that has tormented him for a long time, Nishitani had come to take a conciliatory attitude toward nihilism after lifelong attempts to overcome it. From his texts such as "On Bashō" and *E&T*, we can possibly imagine that in his final years, Nishitani had come to reconcile with nihilism or embrace it rather than aiming to overcome it.

Now the second significance of the emotional reconciliation should become clear. The emotional reconciliation could relieve Nishitani's hatred of nihilism or nihilism, or more properly speaking, release him from his lifelong hatred of or obsession with it. This release from obsession can be achieved only by emptiness, rather than nothingness.

Let us sum up. The emotional reconciliation with nihilism, rather than the intellectual overcoming, can make Nishitani's position more full-fledged than otherwise and can free him from his enduring hatred of or obsession with nihilism. These two fruitions can be regarded as signs of his philosophical and personal maturity. These maturities can only be attained by the emotional

reconciliation with nihilism, rather than the intellectual overcoming of nihilism. They are accomplished only by emptiness, which can have its emotive/volitional sides thanks to the prototypical image of the sky, and not by nothingness, which lacks an emotive/volitional side. The significant difference between emptiness and nothingness for Nishitani, in the final analysis, is that full existential maturity can be attained through the former, but not the latter.

## **Conclusion**

Nishitani changed his key term from nothingness to emptiness in the course of his philosophical career. But it took him decades to substantiate the difference between them. Only after he analyzed the distinction between doctrinal and emotive/volitional emptiness was he able to make a substantial distinction between emptiness and nothingness. The crucial difference lies in the fact that emptiness has its prototypical image in the sky while nothingness doesn't. Due to this difference, only emptiness, but not nothingness, could gain a new dimension, that is, an image that consists of, among others, one or another warm feeling and one or another volition such as that for reconciliation, and play a decisive role in his emotional reconciliation of nihilism and effectively bring about his philosophical and personal maturities. This is the philosophical significance of the key shift of central terms in Nishitani.

However, the above differences are derived from a rather local and accidental linguistic phenomenon that the Chinese terms "emptiness" and "sky" have the same etymology. So the above points might be taken to hold only in the tradition of the Sinosphere, and therefore to be culturally relative and to have a limited significance. I don't think, however, that this is the case. The local and accidental linguistic fact might have provided Nishitani just an occasion to entertain a rather more universal insight that the image, as an integrated representation that has, among other things, emotional and volitional dimensions, can play an important role in our understanding of ourselves and the world. In particular, the image of the sky can rescue us from our desperate feelings of the meaninglessness of our lives and the entire world. How can the image of the sky do so? By presenting itself to us as an amicable meaninglessness. It can do this only because it is an emotion-laden representation rather than an emotion-free idea or concept.

In conclusion, thanks to an accidental linguistic phenomenon, this importance of the image and particularly that of the sky has been more readily acknowledged by those with philosophical acumen in the Sinosphere, such as Rú Jìng and Dōgen, than those in different linguistic and cultural traditions. With his acute philosophical abilities, Nishitani also could detect this importance, but didn't have enough time or occasions to develop his insights. Instead, he left its full development a task for generations to come, dropping hints here and there. I am always struck by such an idea whenever I read his beautiful metaphor of the sky that is cited as the epigraph that began this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 All translations of non-English texts are mine.
- 2 For example, Kumārajīva translated emptiness or *sūnyatā* as nothingness in a famous passage of Nāgārjuna's *Mulamadhyaṃikakarika*; see for example verse 18 of Chapter 24 of Nāgārjuna (1926, 33).
- 3 Hanaoka and Ueda apparently assumed that Nishitani's and Nishida's nothingness were equivalent. But this seems dubious. So, though admitting they provide us valuable insights, I will approach those questions from a different perspective.
- 4 Nishitani didn't explicitly declare himself an existentialist. But he characterized his philosophical position as "the standpoint of the existence of non-self (無我, *mu ga*)" (Nishitani 1987a, 276, 309), and a conversion from Nietzsche's, the early Heidegger's, or Sartre's stance to his own stance as "an existential turn" (80f) or "existential self-awareness" (277), for instance. Nishitani criticized Heidegger's ideas in *Sein und Zeit* (1926/2006), and *Was ist Metaphysik* (1931/1977b) (Nishitani, 1987a, 121). But he suspended his final judgment on the late Heidegger's philosophy, taking it as approaching his own stance (78).
- 5 Nishitani described his aim as "to shed light on the essence and reality of 'existence' and human being" (Nishitani 1987a, 3), "to inquire into the essential aspect of reality and 'human existence' singlehandedly" (288), and so on.
- 6 Nishitani took this Heideggerian concept, *Dasein*, as the "self as an emergence from non-ego" (Nishitani 1987a, 293).
- 7 The source of the citation is in the *Genjōkōan* chapter (現成考按) of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. The original passage is "while it is a delusion to carry the self to confirmation, by practice, of everything, in enlightenment, everything proceeds to confirm, by practice, the self" (Dōgen 1931, 23).
- 8 For instance, Nishitani wrote unreservedly that the reality is life and death, and at the same time neither life nor death (Nishitani 1987a, 59). This remark can be rephrased as that the reality is life, and is not life, and also it is death, and is not death. Representing the propositions that the reality is life, and that the reality is death as A and B respectively, this phrase can also be formalized as  $(A \wedge \neg A) \wedge (B \wedge \neg B)$ . Then we have a double contradiction.  
The list of Nishitanian double contradictions is quite long. It includes those between the itself and the not-itself (Nishitani 1987a, 168), the natural surroundings (or mountains and rivers (山河, *san ga*)) and the self (187), life-and-death and *nirvāṇa* (200), and inside and outside (Nishitani 1967/1991b, 97f).
- 9 Nishitani began with the distinction of the objects of burning and of non-burning, and concluded with sentences that imply flat contradictions; that is, that burning is non-burning, and this is fire and not fire (Nishitani 1987a, 131ff). But what he really could arrive at from the distinction is the claim that the burning of fire is not reflective, and this non-reflectiveness is a necessary condition for its burning of firewood. This doesn't imply any contradiction. So he made an illicit leap from here to contradictory conclusions.
- 10 I have tried to secure the genuineness of Nishitanian contradiction (Deguchi, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, and forthcoming). My approach differs from his reverse-parameterization. I tried to construct a non-classical logical system that can incorporate Nishitanian double contradictions. By showing that the system is logically and philosophically meaningful, I attempted to demonstrate those contradictions as genuine and true. This move is also an extension of Nishitani's efforts to construct an alternative logic that he called a logic of that-is/non (即非, *soku hi*) or of existence (Nishitani 1987a, 211), the *logos* of being (214, 217), the *logos* of 'thing' in 'emptiness' (217), or the *logos* of the boundary-less-ness between *ri* and *ji* (理事無礙, *ri ji mu ge*) (Nishitani 1982/1987b, 131).
- 11 The Japanese word for 'empty' is '*kara*', while its word for 'sky' is '*sora*'.

- 12 For instance, the Japanese interlocutor featured in Heidegger's dialogue, *Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache, Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden*, mentioned the double-meaning between empty and sky (Heidegger 1959, 102).
- 13 The original Chinese phrase is: 無一物中無盡藏, 有花有月有樓臺. Only the first seven characters are written in Figure 1.
- 14 It reads: "[The mind is] as circular as the great hollow." The 'great hollow (大虛, *dà xū*)' means sky.
- 15 This section is based on Deguchi (2009).
- 16 The main theme of the essay is Nishitani's interpretations of the works of Bashō Matsuo (1644–1694), a great master of Japanese Haiku.
- 17 Citing one of Bashō's Haiku, Nishitani wrote that the poem allowed him to "restrict problems [for discussions] only with respect to the place of emptiness as knowledge, for the time being" (Nishitani 1987a, 182).

