

## Searching for an Educational Response to Nihilism in Our Time: An Examination of Keiji Nishitani's Philosophy of Emptiness<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

Many scholars of education consider our age an age of nihilism and seek to find an answer to the question concerning how we should live in nihilistic conditions.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that nihilism is an inherent aspect of our modern culture and that it is important for us to articulate a form of education that can help us overcome nihilism, C.A. Bowers says, "Nihilism is a problem that must be dealt with by all educational theorists."<sup>3</sup> Nihilism is usually considered something negative, and educational scholars typically attempt to articulate a form of education that helps people avoid the problem of nihilism. There are, however, some positive aspects to experiencing a nihilistic state in life. For example, Nietzschean scholars would suggest that by going through nihilism, we may strive to become individuals who can relinquish old values and create new ones. Education is a process of actualizing one's ideal self. It, therefore, is important for educational scholars to analyze nihilism and investigate how nihilistic experiences can be utilized or overcome for self-actualization. In this article, I will examine how Keiji Nishitani, a philosopher of the Kyoto School, addresses a way of actualizing the ideal self by fully experiencing nihilism. What is nihilism? Karen L. Carr categorizes different forms of nihilism, and I am concerned with what she calls "existential nihilism," which refers to "the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment, 'Life has no meaning.'"<sup>4</sup>

There are two forms of existential nihilism in contemporary society. First, people can be nihilistic because they lose the sense that life is meaningful and feel deeply empty; they suffer from this loss of meaning because what used to make sense to them no longer has any meaning to them. Second, people can also be nihilistic by simply conforming to the masses and by satisfying their shallow desires. In this case, people escape from the reality of nihilism. This form of nihilism can be also described as the loss of passion; people do not have anything for which they can live and die, so they follow the masses. This situation can be described as an implicit form of nihilism. This form of nihilism can be also described as the loss of passion; people do not have anything for which they can live and die, so they follow the masses. Contemporary society continually produces commodities that people passively consume in order to maintain a sense of momentary enjoyment. Many of them might say that their lives are meaningful because they are enjoying their lives. However, they are in fact losing meaning or a higher purpose to which they willfully dedicate themselves. In addition, momentary enjoyment may lead people to further pursue more superficial, easily obtainable satisfaction, and this can leave people with more shallow desires to fulfill. I believe that the first form of nihilism, in which one questions the meaning of life, is an important step toward actualizing one's ideal self and improving one's life.

The first form of nihilism, in which one questions the meaning of life, in an important step toward actualizing one's ideal self and improving one's life. Indeed, Nishitani claims that we must go through the first form of nihilism to actualize the ideal self. He argues that the problem of nihilism is the problem of the self; when the self is separated from the ground which supported its life, nihilism takes place. Nishitani thinks that we can overcome nihilism by being radicalized to the field of "emptiness," "*ku*," or "*sunyata*"<sup>5</sup> where the separation of subject and object disappears. Reaching the field of emptiness requires breaking through the field of consciousness (the locus of the separation of subject and object) and the field of nihility (a radicalization of the separation of subject and object). Nishitani believes that emptiness is the reality on which the ideal self grounds itself and that the first form of nihilism is a prerequisite for achieving the ideal state of individuals. Nishitani's idea can offer us a new way of articulating the nature of the ideal self and a way of actualizing the self by fully experiencing nihilism.

#### AN EXAMINATION OF NISHITANI'S PHILOSOPHY

Nishitani argues that the problem of nihilism is existential as well as historical. For Nishitani, nihilism is first of all an existential problem which anybody could face. He says,

if nihilism is anything, it is first of all a problem of the self. And it becomes such a problem only when the self becomes a problem, when the ground of the existence called "self" becomes a problem for itself....Thinking about the issue by surveying it as an objective observer cannot touch the heart of the matter.<sup>6</sup>

One does not understand the truth of nihilism when one simply discusses it as a problem in general, but understands it only when one's existence becomes questionable for oneself. On the other hand, Nishitani also argues that nihilism becomes apparent as a cultural and historical problem in the modern world, especially in the West. Before modernity, even though individuals faced the problem of nihilism and questioned the meaning of life, answers were often given to those people by various religions. However, in the modern world, because of the death of God and the emergence of modern science, many people have trouble finding the meaning of life. Thus, Nishitani thinks that, in modern society, the existential problem of nihilism is integrated with the historical problem of nihilism.

Nishitani claims that, in order to solve the problem of nihilism, we must move from the field of consciousness to the field of nihility and then to the field of emptiness. The field of consciousness is the locus of the separation of subject and object where consciousness tries to grasp objects through conceptual representations. The field of consciousness is the source of dualism. Dualism posits oppositional distinctions such as subject and object, good and bad, and life and death, and it implies that there is the self that tries to grasp and objectify the nature of the object from the self's point of view, which Nishitani thinks is the human-centered attitude. The dualistic view separates the self not only from other things but also from itself. Nishitani says, "At this level, even the self in its very subjectivity is still only *represented* self-consciously as self" (*RN*, 16).

The experience of nihilism is a radicalization of the separation inherent in the field of consciousness. According to Nishitani, nihilism means "that which renders meaningless the meaning of life" (RN, 4). In other words, nihilism is something which our ordinary world meaningless. We are usually busy pursuing many things and tend to find satisfaction in doing so. However, nihilism comes into being when everyday activity is stopped by chance, which induces one to start questioning the meaning of life. We can think about extreme cases in which our lives are altered drastically by facing a serious illness, a terrible disaster, or a loved one's death. In such cases, we start questioning the meaning of life and that of the world. This does not mean, however, that one realizes nihilism only through life-altering or life-threatening experiences. Nihilism can manifest itself at any time. Many of us question the meaning of life even though the questions are not explicit enough to be investigated further. Thus, nihilism is always present just below the surface of everyday life, and if we are serious enough to investigate the nature of our existence, we encounter the reality of nihilism.

In the field of nihilism, things become incomprehensible, and we start asking why we exist. Nishitani calls this state "the Great Doubt" (RN, 18). Recognizing nihilism appears to be depressing at first glance because it threatens the meaning of one's life. It is, however, an ineluctable step, which helps us get closer to the reality of emptiness and realize a more authentic mode of existence than that in the field of consciousness. Nishitani says that the

fundamental conversion in life is occasioned by the opening up of the horizon of nihilism at the ground of life. It is nothing less than a conversion from the self-centered (or man-centered) mode of being, which always asks what *use* things have for us (or for man), to an attitude that asks for what *purpose* we ourselves (or man) exist (RN, 4-5).

According to Nishitani, nihilism has a positive impact on us, but cannot be the final answer to nihilism because nihilism is "relative nothingness" where the separation between the self and the world has not been fully broken through fully. Nishitani says that nihilism or relative nothingness "is still being viewed from the side of existence. It is a nothingness represented from the side of being, a nothingness set in opposition to being, a *relative nothingness*" (RN, 123). Thus, nihilism or relative nothingness is still viewed as a thing, and presupposes the duality of subject and object. Nishitani argues that relative nothingness itself must be emptied by reaching the field of absolute nothingness or emptiness that goes beyond the dichotomy of being and non-being.

What is emptiness? Emptiness does not point to a thing outside of being. Once emptiness is conceived of as a thing, emptiness ceases to become real emptiness. Nishitani says, "The emptiness of *sunyata* is not an emptiness represented as some 'thing' outside of being and other than being. It is not simply an 'empty nothing,' but rather an *absolute emptiness*, emptied even of these representations of emptiness" (RN, 123). Emptiness points to a field where the fields of consciousness and nihilism have been broken through, and where even emptiness itself is emptied. Emptiness is the field where the dualities of subject and object, life and death, and being and non-being, have all been overcome. Emptiness is not something opposed to being;

it is one with being. In the field of emptiness, things, which were once negated on the ground of nihilism, are manifested as they truly are. In the field of emptiness, “each thing becomes manifest in its suchness in its very act of affirming itself” (RN, 131). Here, Nishitani uses the term “suchness,” which presents the original nature of things. I will now further examine the relationship between suchness and emptiness.

Nishitani explains the original nature of things, suchness, in the field of emptiness by using the phrase “Fire does not burn fire.” He argues that this phrase indicates that the self-identity of fire should not be seen from the human’s side, but from the fire’s side. Nishitani says, “In contrast to the notion of substance which comprehends the selfness of fire in its fire-nature (and thus as *being*), the true selfness of fire is its non-fire-nature. The selfness of fire lies in non-combustion. Of course, this non-combustion is not something apart from combustion: fire is non-combustive in its very act of combustion” (RN, 117). This means that as something that burns firewood, fire does not burn itself, and that as something that does not burn itself, fire burns firewood. In other words, fire is fire in burning firewood and in not burning itself. Here, burning and non-burning have become one. According to Nishitani, the true nature of fire is rooted in the field of emptiness which goes beyond the state of dichotomy such as fire/non-fire.

Realizing the field of emptiness is also realizing the true nature of the self or the suchness of the self in the field of emptiness. In the field of emptiness, the self empties its substantial identity and reveals its true nature. This self differs from the ordinary self which is conceived of as a thing from the standpoint of the self and which stands in opposition to all other things. The nature of this self can be explained by the phrase “the self does not know itself.” Nishitani says that the self is usually conceived of as the self that knows itself, but such knowing is facilitated by self-consciousness and mediated through representations, and it does not imply the mode of the self in the field of emptiness. In the field of emptiness, the self does not know itself as the self knows itself in the field of consciousness, which Nishitani calls “not-knowing.” Nishitani says,

At the ground of all knowing from the standpoint of the “subject,” there lies an essential not-knowing. . . . The standpoint of the subject that knows things objectively, and likewise knows itself objectively as a thing called the self, is broken down. This not-knowing is the self as an absolutely non-objective selfness, and the self-awareness that comes about at the point of that not-knowing comes down to a “knowing of non-knowing” (RN, 154).

Thus, in the field of emptiness, the self engages in a knowing of non-knowing. Such a self is one with emptiness and has immediate sense of the merging of the self with the world.

Consequently, in the field of emptiness, everything reveals its original nature and also its absolute uniqueness. Nishitani states, “The absolute uniqueness of a thing means, in other words, that it is situated in the absolute center of all other things. It is situated, as it were, in the position of *master*, with all other things positioned relative to it as *servants*” (RN, 147). Possessing absolute uniqueness requires a thing to hold the position of master to which all the other things

subordinate. In the field of emptiness, everything comes to be recognized as either master or servant. This may sound absurd, but Nishitani thinks that this is because we are caught in logical thinking. Nishitani continues, "That beings one and all are gathered into one, while each one remains absolutely unique in its 'being,' points to a relationship in which, as we said above, all things are master and servant to one another" (*RN*, 148). Nishitani calls this relationship "circuminsessional."<sup>18</sup> Everything is emptied and gathers into the "home-ground" of a thing, while the thing empties itself and gathers into the "home-ground" of everything else (*RN*, 148). Such a relationship is only possible on the field of emptiness where being is one with emptiness.

#### REACHING THE FIELD OF EMPTINESS AS EDUCATION

Many of us now face the problem of nihilism, and educational scholars must articulate a form of education that can help us ethically respond to the problem. I have examined Nishitani's view concerning how one achieves the ideal self in the field of emptiness while experiencing and overcoming nihilism. Now, the question is: How can Nishitani's ideas contribute to articulating a form of education in an age of nihilism? Nishitani would say that the problem of nihilism comes from our separation from the world, and that education must become an endeavor that helps us break through this separation and reach the field of emptiness. This form of education is different from those that attempt to overcome nihilism by creating new values. Indeed, concerning the attitude that tries to preserve or create value systems in education, Hubert Dreyfus maintains, "Thinking that we once had values but that we do not have values now, and that we should regain our values or get new ones, is just another symptom of the trouble."<sup>7</sup> Dreyfus thinks that nihilism is the loss of meaning and seriousness, which derives from our detached attitude towards the outside world. According to Dreyfus, the cause of nihilism is our tendency to objectify and decontextualize the reality of the world. Once we decontextualize the world, we come to see the world as a system of abstract ideas. Accordingly, we believe that we are the ones who choose and create the ideas and also values. The idea that humans create values leads us, in turn, to believe that there is no absolute value that has a strong claim on us. Since no absolute value is established, everything becomes equal. Consequently, we cannot find anything to which we can seriously commit ourselves, and eventually lose the meaning of life. Dreyfus, therefore, contends that the attitude that tries to save human values in education may actually promote nihilism.

Although Nishitani's ideas solve Dreyfus's concern and can help us eliminate the separation between the knower and the known, one may ask whether Nishitani's idea leads us to conformism by surrendering ourselves to emptiness. However, we must note that no distinction exists between the self and emptiness in the field of emptiness. Once the self conceives of emptiness as something in relation to itself, emptiness ceases to be real emptiness. At the same time, once the self relates itself to something called emptiness, the self ceases to be the true self. The self cannot hold on to the concept of emptiness and must keep emptying conceptual representations created through relating itself to other things. Therefore, the emptying activity

empties everything to which one normally tends to adhere, and eliminates conformism. This is a process of finding one's true self that is not distracted by any prejudices. One's education to find one's true self in the field of emptiness never ends.

Moreover, education that aims at reaching or realizing the field of emptiness will eventually enhance one's compassion for others and connection with others. Concerning the ethical implication of the concept of emptiness, Elizabeth Gallu argues that an "ethic that radiates compassion is revealed, not through reason, but in emptiness and through the realization that all things are inextricably bound."<sup>8</sup> Gallu thinks that an ethic of compassion is very important for creating a genuine ethical community. In the field of reciprocity or emptiness, she argues, "we find the basis for an ethical life where *gratitude* rather than duty is the mediatory agent between selves and others."<sup>9</sup> In the field of emptiness, since one realizes that one's life is connected with all other things, one naturally comes to appreciate that one is given life by others. In addition, in the field of emptiness, no substantial distinction between one and others exists even though one does not lose one's distinct uniqueness or suchness. Consequently one considers others' concerns and happiness as one's own. One's salvation depends on the salvation of others and vice versa. Therefore, Nishitani's ideal self is not distracted by any prejudice and is the source of compassion.

What kind of educational practice is helpful in reaching the field of emptiness? It is quite difficult to explain how the experience of emptiness happens. Nishitani says that, in order to reach the field of emptiness, we must shift from the level of thought to that of existence. Nishitani asserts, "Absolute nothingness, wherein even that 'is' is negated, is not possible as a nothingness that is thought but only as a nothingness that is lived" (*RN*, 70). He also says, "The shift of man as person from person-centered self-prehension to self-revelation as the manifestation of absolute nothingness...requires an existential conversion, a change of heart within man himself."<sup>24</sup> Since reaching the field of emptiness is an existential conversion, we do not know the nature of emptiness until we experience it. It is similar to the leap of faith that Kierkegaard had difficulty communicating to his readers. Furthermore, even though we can experience the field of emptiness, we cannot properly describe the nature of the experience in propositional terms due to the ineffability of the experience. Even a paradoxical statement such as "fire does not burn itself" does not exactly represent the reality of emptiness itself. These features of emptiness imply that teachers cannot directly provide students with the experience of emptiness. Is there, then, anything teachers can do to help students reach the field of emptiness?

In Zen, in order to reach the field of emptiness, people practice *zazen* (sitting meditation), but it may be too simple to assume that we should merely ask students to practice *zazen*. Indeed, in Zen, any activity in everyday life must be done as if one is practicing *zazen*. Nishitani says that we can encounter the true reality of emptiness in everyday life. He says, "true reality is encountered while staying in the midst of the everyday and returning ever more deeply into its depth and inner recesses."<sup>10</sup> For example, we can experience the field of emptiness through the experience of beauty

through nature or works of art. For example, Nishitani describes his own experience of the field of emptiness where he truly saw the suchness of a sunrise:

Watching the sun rise from the balcony, I was suddenly struck by a powerful feeling. The light of the morning sun formed a golden thread and jumped up, like a serpent as it were, to where I was standing. While being bathed in the brightness of the sun's ray, I really felt that I was truly seeing the sun. The overwhelming experience was that the radiance of the sun was focused on me and that the world was opening brightly, concentrated on myself alone. Although in a very elemental form, it was clear to me that the world is a place open to all things to realize themselves as they truly are. At the same time the openness of emptiness includes the fact that I see, hear, and know things as they are.<sup>11</sup>

Here Nishitani beautifully describes a touching experience where the nature of the world revealed itself to him. He also mentions that such an experience happens even when we encounter small things such as a flower or a sound. Besides the experience of nature, Nishitani also thinks that the field of emptiness can be realized through the experience of art. Showing a poem which Nishitani quotes, may be helpful:

From the pine tree  
learn of the pine tree  
And from the bamboo  
of the bamboo (*RN*, 128).

Concerning this poem, Nishitani says that we are called to enter into the mode of being where the pine tree is the pine tree itself, and the bamboo is the bamboo itself, and from there to look at the pine tree and the bamboo. He calls on us to betake ourselves 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*) 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. It is on the field of sunyata that this becomes possible (*RN*, 128). Thus, we can experience the field of emptiness through various experiences such as those of nature and art.

In order to have such an experience, we should learn to attune ourselves to the suchness of things. The field of emptiness is realized when we are freed from the distractions of our thoughts, and when we pay attention to the presence of each moment of our activities. The field of emptiness is given to us when we empty and open ourselves and the power of an experience breaks through the frame of the self. Although teachers cannot directly provide students with the field of emptiness itself, they can help students learn to attune themselves to the suchness of things and provide students with experiences such as those of beauty through nature and works of art, whose power can break through the frame of the self. This will allow the field of emptiness to reveal itself.

Concerning Nishitani's idea of emptiness, some might ask if nihilism, the lack of meaning, can be solved by the idea of emptiness; even if we realize that we are connected to everything else, is not the problem of nihilism still with us? Nishitani would say that the problem of meaning presupposes the distinction between the self and the world, and such a problem disappears in the field of emptiness. In addition, he would say that emptiness is not simply conceived of as an idea, but something to be felt and embodied within us. In other words, emptiness is an embodied experience

where the mind and the body of the self become one with the world so that the problem of meaning disappears. However, there is still another question: Can we indeed reach the field of emptiness?

This question leads to the last point of this paper. According to Nishitani, in order to reach the field of emptiness, we must first go through the field of nihilism. This means that if students have not seriously started questioning the meaning of life, no activities can help them reach the field of emptiness. In contemporary society, many people experience an implicit form of nihilism, namely, conforming to the masses and satisfying their shallow desires. They are not aware of the loss of meaning or the terror that nihilism entails. The fact that they are not aware of the reality of nihilism shows they are deeply caught in nihilism. Concerning the plausibility of Nishitani's idea of emptiness for overcoming nihilism, Masako Keta says that many of us do not feel the pressure from the loss that nihilism entails and cannot overcome nihilism by striving for the field of emptiness as Nishitani suggests, which she believes indicates that nihilism is now progressing further.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that, in order to respond to such a contemporary nihilism, we must consider not only how students can reach the field of emptiness but also how they can experience the field of nihilism in the first place. Although Nishitani's educational project attempts to utilize nihilistic experiences as a springboard to reach the field of emptiness, we must first assist students to become aware of the reality of nihilism. Recognizing the reality of nihilism is sometimes terrifying and can prevent students from affirming life. Thus, whether students must face the reality of nihilism may be debatable. However, I believe that facing the reality of nihilism is an important and inevitable step for students to overcome it and realize their true nature. I also believe that it is critical that students have dedicated teachers who can assist them in the process. I hope to examine in the future how Nishitani's ideas can be contextualized in various educational practices. Nihilism is spreading throughout the world, and it is important for us to learn different ways of educating people in an age of nihilism.

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1. I am grateful to Professor René Arcilla for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Knowledge and Human Values: A Genealogy of Nihilism," *Teachers College Record* 82, no. 3 (1981): 507-20; C.A. Bowers, "Culture against Itself: Nihilism as an Element in Recent Educational Thought," *American Journal of Education* 93, no. 4 (1985): 465-90; and Nigel Blake et al., *Education in an Age of Nihilism* (London: Routledge/Falmer, 2000).

3. Bowers, "Culture against Itself," 484.

4. Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaningless* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 18.

5. The term "ku" or "sūnyata," a Buddhist concept, is usually translated as "emptiness" in English-speaking countries. Nishitani's philosophy is greatly influenced by Buddhist traditions, especially, Zen, and Nishitani uses many concepts taken from Buddhism, but those concepts are reconsidered in the context of contemporary philosophy. See Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xlix.

6. Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1.

7. Dreyfus, "Knowledge and Human Values," 507.

8. Elizabeth Gallu, "Sunyata, Ethics, and Authentic Interconnectedness," in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji: Encounter with Emptiness*, ed. Taitetsu Unno (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 189.
9. *Ibid.*, 200.
10. Keiji Nishitani, "Encounter with Emptiness: A Message from Nishitani Keiji," in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, ed. Taitetsu Unno (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 3-4.
11. *Ibid.*, 2.
12. See Masako Keta, *Nihirizumu no shisaku* (Tokyo:1999).