EMPTY ETHICS:

BODHISATTVA ETHICS IN NISHITANI KEIJI'S RELIGION AND NOTHINGNESS

Katherine Anne Narraway

Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University, Montreal
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Abstract/Résumé

Writings about Buddhist ethics and Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics in particular cannot escape two basic problems. The first problem is that the often-misunderstood soteriological aim of Mahāyāna, achieving Nirvana, conflicts with the tradition's normative ethics because Nirvana is posited as transcending worldly conventions. The second problem is that Mahāyāna Buddhist emptiness ontology seems to destroy the idea of ethical action by revealing the fallacy of acting from the standpoint of an individual self. For these reasons, it has been said that Mahāyāna ethics is impossible. By utilizing the Zen Buddhist philosophy of Nishitani Keiji's Religion and Nothingness, I will demonstrate that these two problems are misinterpretations of basic Mahāyāna tenets and that when Mahāyāna soteriology and ontology are properly understood, they do not conflict with the tradition's normative ethics. Furthermore, I will use Nishitani's interpretation of the Bodhisattva to show that there is ethics without an ethical agent.

Les écrits sur l'éthique bouddhiste en général et l'éthique bouddhiste mahāyāna en particulier font face à deux problèmes élémentaires. Le premier problème est que l'interprétation usuelle du but sotériologique mahāyāna, soit d'atteindre le nirvana, entre en conflit avec l'éthique normative traditionnelle, puisque le Nirvana propose une acception transcendant les conventions mondiales. Le second problème est que l'ontologie du vide bouddhiste mahāyāna semble détruire l'idée même d'une action éthique lorsqu'elle révèle le sophisme de l'action à partir du point de vue de l'individu. Ces deux problèmes affirmer qu'il n'existe pas d'éthique Mahāyāna. En nous appuyant sur la philosophie bouddhiste zen de Nishitani Keiji dans Religion and Nothingness, nous démontrerons que les deux problèmes découlent en fait d'interprétations erronées, et que si la sotériologie et l'ontologie mahāyāna sont interprétées adéquatement, elles ne s'opposent aucunement à l'éthique normative traditionnelle. De plus, nous utiliserons l'interprétation du concept de bodhisattva de Nishitani pour révéler qu'il peut y avoir éthique sans agent moral.

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Conventions

Diacritical marks are used in this thesis for Japanese words with long vowels (including proper names) and for Sanskrit words that have not been integrated into the English language according to The Oxford English Dictionary, 2008. Sanskrit words that this dictionary indicates have been adopted into English, and which are used in this thesis, are: Buddha, Bodhisattva, karma, Nirvana, and sutra. Sanskrit words that have not been adopted into English are written with diacritical marks and, unless they are proper names, are italicized. Some of the most common words are: Mahāyāna, *saṃsāra, śūnyatā,* and Theravāda.

Introduction

Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics in general and Zen Buddhist ethics in particular cannot accurately be defined under any specific Western model. This is primarily the case because in Western ethical systems there is generally little conflict between metaethics and normative ethics, or between the soteriological goal of a religion and its daily practices. Mahāyāna Buddhism, however, is an example of a system whose often-misconceptualized highest philosophical end, Nirvana[1], directly conflicts with normative ethics. This is because the non-dual element in Mahāyāna Nirvana[2] seems to undercut any ethical distinctions between good and bad. A further and related concern is that Mahāyāna emptiness ontology destroys the concept of ethical action by literally emptying it of meaning.

This line of argumentation is based on numerous misconceptions and has led many to assert that there can be no ethics in Mahāyāna Buddhism because ethical concern is apparently antithetical to the tradition's highest truths. For example, Walpola Sri Rahula, author of What the Buddha Taught, famously wrote that Mahāyāna ontology "appears divorced from or perhaps even contrary to ethics" (Rahula 17) and Lee Stauffer, critiquing Zen Buddhism in particular,

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[1] Throughout this thesis, I will draw a distinction between the early Indian/Theravāda understanding of Nirvana and what I call "Mahāyāna Nirvana." What I am calling "Mahāyāna Nirvana" is "*apratiṣṭhita* (non-dwelling) Nirvana" (Nagao 62). *apratiṣṭhita*-Nirvana means "to exit from Nirvana and to come down into *saṃsāra*" (Nagao 65). In contrast to early Indian and Theravāda Buddhism, "Mahāyāna Nirvana" is not a final resting place.

[2] The term *apratiṣṭhita* also contains the meaning *advaya*, "non-duality" (Nagao 67).

argues that Mahāyāna ethics is impossible "based on its doctrine of non-discrimination" (quoted in Palmer 117). The goal of this thesis is to explicate the Zen Buddhist philosophy of Nishitani Keiji as found in Religion and Nothingness. By doing so, I intend to draw out of this philosophy a Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. Specifically, I will argue that Nishitani offers an ethical version of original enlightenment theory. For him, the Bodhisattva embodies the highest truths of Mahāyāna Buddhism *and* is an exemplar of its normative ethics. Although Nishitani did not set out to write an ethics, nevertheless since his ontology is Bodhisattva-based, it is possible to derive a Mahāyāna ethics from his ontology. This reading of Religion and Nothingness is useful for the burgeoning field of Buddhist ethics because this text can be used to show that there is no conflict between Mahāyāna Buddhism's soteriology, its ontology, and its normative ethics.

I will begin the first chapter, *"Empty" Ethics?,* by discussing the emergence of the field of Buddhist ethics. The purpose of this discussion is to show that this relatively new field has focused almost entirely on early Indian and modern Theravāda Buddhism. As a result, "Buddhist ethics" is commonly understood to be a strict following of codes of conduct in order to achieve Buddhahood. When Mahāyāna ethics is discussed, its focus on emptiness is often believed to undermine codes of conduct. For example, the actions of Bodhisattvas are often described as justified whether or not Buddhist precepts are obeyed or broken.[3] Therefore, Mahāyāna is presented as super-ethical and sometimes as

[3] Peter Harvey provides numerous references to Mahāyāna scriptures to support this point. He focuses specifically on Śāntideva's *Śiksā-samuccaya*, where it is argued:

lacking ethics entirely. I will reveal the root of this misconception throughout this chapter, emphasizing that scholars must draw a clear distinction between early Indian/Theravāda traditions and Mahāyāna when discussing ethics.

Next, I will show that Mahāyāna Buddhism, because of its emptiness ontology, cannot properly be defined under any existing model of ethics. I will look at the two ethical theories to which Mahāyāna is often compared – virtue ethics and decision theory[4] – and show that the non-centrality of the ethical agent in Buddhist philosophy, and indeed the ethical agent's non-existence, leaves Mahāyāna Buddhism outside of the usual categorizations, although not without ethics.

Lastly, I will discuss the concepts that seem to most seriously hinder the formulation of a Mahāyāna ethics, Nirvana and *śūnyatā*. I will first argue that scholars, often writing from an early Indian Buddhist background, have continually applied an early Indian understanding of Nirvana to Mahāyāna, arguing that it is a state that transcends *saṃsāra*, and thereby also transcends all conventional distinctions such as good and evil. I will agree with scholars in the field who argue against this position, saying that though the moment of Awakening is a moment in which all such distinctions are broken through, this is not a resting point, nor the final goal of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice. Properly understood, leaving the world behind is not the goal of "achieving Nirvana." Nirvana does not transcend *saṃsāra*, but in the Mahāyāna it is both identical to

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"where the motive is to help people, there is no fault in an action" and "at the time for giving one can overlook the practice of morality and so forth" (Harvey 135).

[4] By "decision theory" I mean ethical theories that try to reveal the rational calculation behind making the "right" decision, such as utilitarianism.

and different from *saṃsāra*. The significance of this understanding for ethics is that after the moment of realization, distinctions, including ethical judgments, remain. Furthermore, the soteriological goal of Mahāyāna is not the attainment of Nirvana but the saving of all sentient beings.

The concept of *śūnyatā* is a similarly vexing concept to be discussed in this chapter. By the term *śūnyatā,* I mean to indicate the ultimate ontological reality of the world. *Śūnyatā*, as it relates to the Buddhist notion of *anatman*, no-self, presents one major question distinct from the problems raised by Nirvana: can there be an ethics without an ethical agent? This problem will be explained in this chapter, and I will use Nishitani Keiji's philosophy to answer this question in the affirmative in the following two chapters.

In the second chapter, *Nishitani Keiji and the Kyoto School*, I will introduce the Kyoto School of Philosophy and Nishitani Keiji's place therein. I will give a thorough exegesis of Nishitani Keiji's three fields – the field of consciousness, the field of nihility and the field of *śūnyatā* - and reveal their similarity with the three stages of the path in Mahāyāna Buddhism. I will also define and explain much of the terminology of Religion and Nothingness that is essential to my argument: circuminsessional interpenetration, *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana, and homeground, among others. I will show how Nishitani's Mahāyāna explanation of Nirvana, not as a transcendent truth, but as *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana, answers the common assertion that Nirvana is not an ethical concept. For Nishitani, *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana is, at base, ethical, and thus the soteriological aim of Mahāyāna is always the saving of all sentient beings, not achieving

Nirvana for oneself. I will then show how his understanding of the self from the standpoint of *śūnyatā* – a self that is a self because it is no-self - is essentially ethical. This renders null the common complaint that Mahāyāna ontology eradicates ethics.

In the third and final chapter, *Bodhisattva Ethics*, I will present Nishitani's idea that a human being on the homeground acts in an other-centered manner because being a Bodhisattva is the very definition of human being. This is the core of ethics for Nishitani; just as all beings have Buddha-nature at birth, so too we are originally ethical.

Chapter One: Empty Ethics

1.1. Buddhist Ethics as a Scholarly Discipline

In the 1979 Religious Studies Review, Frank E. Reynolds published the first bibliographic guide to Buddhist ethics: "Buddhist Ethics: A bibliographical essay." The existence of such a guide reveals that as of the late nineteen seventies Buddhist ethics was emerging as a subfield of Buddhist studies. As Reynolds' guide evinced, much of the early writings on Buddhist ethics was descriptive in nature, summarizing ethical rules and guidelines from, primarily, early Indian Buddhist sources. Although he identified many primary and secondary sources for the study of Buddhist ethics, he described "progress" in this emerging field as "limited": "For the most part, Western scholars engaged in the historical or systematic study of ethics have virtually ignored the Buddhist tradition. And, from their side, Buddhologists have devoted relatively little attention to the study of the ethical dimensions of Buddhist expressions" (Reynolds 47). He did admit that he felt that was about to change and that the field of Buddhist ethics would soon assert itself. However, he stated that in order for Buddhist ethics to be a relevant discipline, writings in this field would need to be more than merely descriptive.

In an essay compiled thirteen years later and intended to supplement Reynolds' earlier work, Charles Hallisey wrote that Reynolds did more than just collect scattered materials that may be relevant to Buddhist ethics, rather "his survey was really a basal assessment of resources for a field that he and others were just beginning to define" (Hallisey 278). However, even in 1992, Hallisey was still reluctant to describe Buddhist ethics as a delineated field of study. He wrote that even though the nineteen eighties saw an increase in translations of Buddhist primary texts and also an increase in secondary literature relevant to Buddhist ethics, "there is no indication that it has done so as a result of the formation of a broadly based, self-conscious community of scholars" (Hallisey 278-279). However, unlike the works cited by Reynolds, the books of the 1980's cited by Hallisey covered not only early Indian sources, but also many Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources, as well as articles comparing Buddhist and Christian ethics, and some articles about Buddhist social ethics. Most of the works remained primarily descriptive in scope, however.

But 1992 was also the year of the publication of Damien Keown's The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, the work that really established Buddhist ethics as a major subfield of Buddhist studies, according to Charles S. Prebish (Prebish 298). He writes that Keown's work "offered researchers a creative paradigm shift, useful for understanding the whole of the Buddhist ethical tradition" (Prebish 298). Keown's work is not merely descriptive, but offers a systematic philosophical interpretation of Buddhist ethics, comparing it with the virtue ethics of Aristotle. His teleological understanding of Buddhist ethics has greatly

influenced this field. Indeed, since 1992, writings about current ethical problems such as abortion and environmental degradation from a Buddhist perspective have increased exponentially, as Western writers have become more concerned with finding a Buddhist social ethic.

Evidence that Buddhist ethics had, in fact, become a major subfield of Buddhist studies supported by a community of committed scholars was evident with the 1994 online launch of the Journal of Buddhist Ethics, the first academic journal dedicated solely to this topic. The journal interpreted ethics in a broad sense, so as to incorporate as many types of articles in this field as possible, and classified its subject matter into ten broad headings.[5] In addition to this publication, it has now become commonplace for academic journals to publish articles relating to some form of Buddhist ethics.

However, it remains a fact that most broad, English-language works about Buddhist ethics are concerned with early Indian Buddhism and contemporary Theravāda Buddhism, often to the neglect of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The two most notable exceptions are Damien Keown's The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, which includes a 35 page analysis of Indian Mahāyāna and Peter Harvey's textbook An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics that devotes 25 pages to "Mahāyāna adaptations" of early Buddhist ideas.

That there are now textbooks to which professors of Buddhist studies can turn in order to fashion an undergraduate course on Buddhist ethics is a strong

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[5] 1. Vinaya and Jurisprudence; 2. Medical ethics; 3. Philosophical Ethics; 4. Human Rights; 5. Ethics and Psychology; 6. Ecology and the Environment; 7. Social and Political Philosophy; 8. Cross-cultural Ethics; 9. Ethics and Anthropology; 10. Interfaith Dialogue on Ethics

indication that ethics has become a major subfield of Buddhist studies. Both Keown and Harvey's books are excellent resources and Harvey's in particular is a useful tool to begin research in a particular sub-field of Buddhist ethics such as bioethics, or to understand the general Buddhist position on ethical issues like suicide, war, and abortion. However, that only one chapter of each general textbook is devoted to Mahāyāna, the most adhered-to school of Buddhism in the world, is troubling.[6]

As David W. Chappell argues, certainly with its emphasis on compassion, should not Mahāyāna Buddhism inspire more Western writings on Mahāyāna Ethics? Chappell believes there are at least six reasons for insufficient general Western studies on Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. His list is as follows:

> (1) Most of the 200 Indian Mahāyāna ethical texts that exist are found only in Chinese and have not been translated; (2) the complexity, diversity, and vastness of these 200 Indian Mahāyāna ethical texts has made a comprehensive study difficult; (3) the Indian Mahāyāna sponsorship of ascetic and meditative powers produced idealistic ethical visions often unrelated to social practices; (4) since strong Confucian-style governments in East Asia made social involvement by Buddhist clergy largely illegal, ethical guidelines on social issues beyond the monastic precepts were irrelevant; (5) until recent times, new East Asian lay Mahāyāna movements have largely adopted Confucian ethics or emulated the clergy; and (6) East Asian Buddhism often lacked sustained collaboration across sectarian and cultural boundaries, so that no institutional instrument existed (like the Vatican) to discuss and formulate common Mahāyāna ethical principles (Chappell 46).

Leaving aside for the moment the syncretism of Confucianism and Buddhism in many East Asian countries, what is telling about Chappell's list is that it displays the underlying logic that if a general work on Mahāyāna ethics were to be produced, it would have to be grounded upon *all* the varied texts of Indian

[6] I am not claiming that there exist no books that are concerned with Mahāyāna Ethics, merely that no *general textbooks* exist that describe "Buddhist ethics" from a Mahāyāna perspective.

Mahāyāna. While this would be ideal, it should not be justification for not attempting a general work on Mahāyāna ethics, as writings on early Indian or Theravāda ethics also cannot cover the rich array of sources in one work. A useful example is still Damien Keown's chapter on Mahāyāna ethics, which focuses mostly on evidence from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi-sutra* and, in many ways, is a helpful basic introduction to Indian Mahāyāna ethics, outlining the Perfections (*pāramitās*), the tripartite structure of Indian Mahāyāna ethics, and introducing the Bodhisattva while also discussing the tensions raised by the doctrine of skillful means (*upāya*).

The problem with Damien Keown's chapter, which is a microcosm of the larger problem for a work on Mahāyāna ethics, is that he limits his discussion to one branch of Mahāyāna, early Indian Mahāyāna, excluding *without mention* all later developments in the Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese traditions.

Peter Harvey's chapter on Mahāyāna ethics does at least mention specific strands of Mahāyāna thought and practice beyond Indian Mahāyāna, though only Tantra, Pure Land, Zen and Nichiren Buddhism are mentioned and all in the span of six pages. The focus of his brief chapter is on the Bodhisattva, and on the doctrine of skillful means overriding the precepts. Overall, in his 25 pages, he manages to portray Mahāyāna Buddhism as supra-ethical, or, rather, as an ethic for Bodhisattvas, not ordinary persons.

Because of the difficulty of selecting, translating, and writing about often contradictory texts under the heading "Mahāyāna ethics", the field of Mahāyāna ethics has necessarily subdivided into sub-fields according to the various

Mahāyāna traditions. While this is a good development and has lead to a few notable studies of tradition-specific ethics such as Christopher Ives' Zen Awakening and Society and Alex Wayman's Ethics of Tibet, students are still being introduced to Buddhist ethics with general textbooks based on primarily early Indian or Theravāda Buddhist sources. As a result, many general statements about "Buddhist" ethics are not representative of Buddhism's varied traditions.

1.2. The problem of categorization

Mahāyāna Buddhism, and by extension the philosophical aspects of Japanese Zen that Nishitani discusses, cannot properly be defined under any existing model of ethics. I believe this to be the case not because its soteriology and normative ethics conflict. I do not believe there is a conflict there and will address this later in Chapter One. I believe Mahāyāna Buddhism cannot be defined in this manner because usual ethical theories have an ethical agent at the center of a system of rules. "Agent" here means an ego. Mahāyāna Buddhism's soteriological aim is to reveal the fallacy of self-centered being and reveal that, ontologically, there are no "selves." It is my belief that no Western theory of ethics can be adapted to accommodate this absence of ethical agent/ego. This, however, does not mean that Mahāyāna is un-ethical.

As with any comparative pursuit, applying the term "ethics" to a tradition that did not self-consciously posit a "science of morals" in the same manner is

methodologically problematic. However, if a Western ethical theory is going to be applied to Buddhist ethics, inevitably scholars will ask which of the categories of Western ethics best applies to Buddhism. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss what definition of "ethics" can be best applied to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Arthur J. Dyck has broadly defined ethics as the study of the fundamental principles that define values and determine moral duty and obligation (quoted. in Kammer 11-12) Insofar as ethics deals with how human beings should act in particular situations, "what" humans should be, and with how communities should be governed, ethics in general leads individuals to reflect on the morals and values of their society. In the West, this type of questioning is commonly divided into three approaches: descriptive ethics, normative ethics and metaethics.

Descriptive ethics is primarily concerned with providing a descriptive account of the moral prescriptions and normative codes of conduct of certain communities of people, and often attempts to show how these rules are applied in specific contexts without taking a moral stance on the behavior being studied. Normative ethics deals with general rules governing human action and often tries to find justification for these norms, or, in other words, normative ethics takes a moral stance. Metaethics seeks to clarify and analyze the terminology of descriptive and normative ethics and tries to critically examine the logic of ethical systems, often through comparing competing ethical systems with one another (Keown, 2005, 21-22).

The two strands of normative ethics to which Buddhism is often compared are virtue ethics and decision theory. By the term "virtue ethics" I mean to

indicate the approach to normative ethics that emphasizes moral character, rather than duties or rules (which is the focus of deontological ethics). By "decision theory," I mean to indicate the approach to normative ethics that emphasizes the rationality of the decision making process, like utilitarianism. There is a major difference between the two approaches. A decision theory will emphasize the rational process one goes through in order to make a moral decision. A virtue ethics will emphasize the way in which one's character is affected by one's activities. The philosophical root of virtue ethics lies in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and is a fairly recent addition to contemporary moral theory, while decision theories often derive from the eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophers Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill.[7]

Due to Keown's decisive work, it is very common to compare Buddhist ethics and virtue ethics. Buddhist ethics in general, including Mahāyāna, does bear a close resemblance to virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is primarily concerned with self-transformation and not simply with following certain kinds of rules, though following rules is important. The goal of virtue ethics is "first and foremost to be or become a certain kind of person" (Keown, 1992, 23). By following certain rules and guidelines, and furthermore by actualizing those guidelines in daily activity, an individual is able to be truly moral. Virtue ethics "seeks the transformation of the *personality* through the development of correct habits over time…" (Keown 23, *italics added*). This is true of early Indian Buddhism and Mahāyāna. However, when one takes the notion of emptiness into

[7] I have drawn this brief outline from the introduction to Rosalind Hursthouse's 1999 work On Virtue Ethics, pages 1-5.

account, one recognizes an additional nuance in Mahāyāna. From a pre-enlightenment standpoint, Mahāyāna ethics does indeed resemble virtue ethics as described above. However, from a post-enlightenment standpoint, where there is no-self, that this comparison breaks down. A problem in the field of Buddhist ethics is that scholars are often unclear which standpoint they are discussing. This often results in scholars using the same terminology differently, resulting in confusion rather than dialogue.

I believe there are two problems with describing Mahāyāna Buddhism as a virtue ethics, though I do believe it is the Western theory of ethics that most closely resembles Buddhist practice. The first problem is that one aspect of the soteriological aim of all Buddhism, including Mahāyāna, is to dissolve the egotistical concept of self – i.e. the ethical agent – rather than turn an individual from vice to virtue.

No-self, or *anatman*, is one of the three marks of existence in Buddhism. In early Buddhism, the term *anatman* was intended to contrast with the Hindu term *atman*, the eternal self. Buddhists believe the idea of an eternal self "is no more than an idea that we apply to the flow of consciousness, and if we closely examine the contents of consciousness we can find no such self in it" (Leaman 17-18). The illusion that there is a substantial self leads to an incorrect understanding of reality and therefore to suffering. For Buddhists, "there is no such thing as a real self, nor any permanence in the world of experience" (Leaman 93) and all that exists is a flow of causes, with no lasting self or object behind it.

This concept is a defining feature of early Indian Buddhism, Theravāda, and the various schools of Mahāyāna.

It is not a matter of semantics to contend that because there is, ontologically, no self to be shaped, that Mahāyāna Buddhism is not a virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, *by definition*, requires an ego that over time will change and develop. It is not appropriate to replace "self" (as in "inherently existing self") with "selfless-self, non-self, empty-self" in order to force Buddhism to fit into the virtue ethics mold.

However, it does make sense to see Buddhism as a kind of virtue ethics because at the heart of its practices is the goal of becoming a better person. Buddhism has practices such as meditation and chanting and also an entire literature, *Jataka Tales*, devoted to how the Buddha became a Buddha. It certainly does appear to be a tradition bent on re-shaping the person into a Buddha. However, to say that Mahāyāna is a virtue ethics dismisses something of central importance to Buddhists – the doctrine of *anatman*, no-self. No matter how complicated or esoteric, this ontology is of principal importance. A true conception of "Mahāyāna ethics", one that includes both pre and post-enlightenment ethics, would need to operate with no ethical agent. As this thesis will later show, Nishitani Keiji's philosophy holds this Buddhist truth as central and his work can still be used to present an ethical theory. However this theory does not match up with any Western framework such as virtue ethics.

The second problem with describing Buddhism as a virtue ethics lies in the teleological aspect of virtue ethics. Keown describes the Mahāyāna goal-

oriented activity of reaching Nirvana as similar to the pursuit of *eudaimonia* in Aristotle. In one sense this is very true in Mahāyāna, especially Zen Buddhism. Just as Aristotle says that happiness is an activity rather than an end – that the pursuit of *eudaimonia* is *eudaimonia* itself – Dōgen, a Sōtō Zen master, writes in the *Shōbōgenzō*: "practice is enlightenment" (Kim 64). In both systems, moral activity is importantly not really a striving, goal-oriented activity. However, the moment of awakening in Mahāyāna does change the character of the "goal" in a very important way.

Here we encounter, again, Buddhist "emptiness" ontology. While "practice is enlightenment" is an important idea, the goal of practice is, in a sense, different pre- and post-enlightenment. Pre-enlightenment, the goal of achieving Nirvana is self-centered; one is trying to achieve Nirvana for oneself. Post-enlightenment, one's activity is other-centered Bodhisattva-activity, trying to bring all sentient beings to enlightenment. Furthermore, post-realization "activity" is activity without intention. This non-intentional action, *wu wei*, is not self-centered action but rather the natural activity of a non-ego. Here we again see a major difference between virtue ethics, which prioritizes the self, and Mahāyāna, which has a radically different ontology.

In my opinion, the comparison between Mahāyāna and virtue ethics, though not a perfect fit, is the closest scholars have come to forcing Mahāyāna to fit within an existing theory of Western ethics. However, it is also very common to compare Buddhism and decision theories. In most literature about Buddhist ethics, descriptive ethics are drawn from Buddhist precepts, which are seen to be

prescriptive.[8] The precepts are often presented as a guide for making decisions. To think about precepts in this manner is to compare Buddhism and decision theory, a comparison that is both more or less appropriate in terms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is true that practitioners do follow the precepts as guides for making decisions. However, from the standpoint of Nirvana (non-duality), the precepts are descriptive rather than prescriptive (Aitken 79). It is the constant presence of this post-enlightenment perspective that complicates labeling Mahāyāna as a decision theory.

Decision theories focus on how human beings use their freedom to make choices. When a person is presented with options, decision theories argue that the choice of one option over another is not a random decision, but rather a decision based upon social conditioning and often "goal oriented behavior in the presence of options" (Hansson "Decision Theory" http://www.infra.kth.se/~soh/decisiontheory.pdf). One of the most common decision theories is utilitarianism. According to this ethical theory, one must calculate the good that could come from various options, and then choose the option that produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In direct contrast with utilitarianism is another kind of decision theory: Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. Kant believed in a supreme principle of morality – an *imperative* – that functioned as the norm for all action. According to this imperative an individual follows a moral rule according to whether that rule can be willed universally, meaning a moral act is one that all individuals should

[8] See Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues, Chapter 1, Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé, Buddhist Ethics, pp 22-24 and 80-99 and Reginald A. Ray, Buddhist Saints in India, pp. 15-20, as excellent examples.

perform in similar circumstances.[9] Generally, most moral rules can be interpreted as decision theories because following an ethical rule turns making an ethical decision into a rational calculation. Whether the rational calculation is goal-oriented (teleological) or rule-oriented (deontological), the decision making process is remarkably similar. For example, in a Christian context, one might say that the decision to "turn the other cheek" is based upon the desire to go to Heaven and the process the mind goes through in order to "turn the other cheek" is a step-by-step rational calculation with this end-goal in mind.[10]

The attempt to depict Mahāyāna Buddhism as a decision theory encounters a problem similar to comparing Mahāyāna and virtue ethics. From a post-enlightenment standpoint, one who "turns the other cheek" does not do so based on a calculation of gains for an individual self. The thought process is not "if I do a good deed, I will receive my eternal reward." There is no ethical agent to make this step-by-step calculation to obtain reward. Again, an enlightened person's activity *is* a kind of goal-oriented activity, however it is *lived in enlightenment*, and therefore is fundamentally different from self-centered goal-

[9] It is extraordinarily difficult to express the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, from whose work modern deontological ethics arises, in a few sentences. In this brief explanation I have drawn upon what is often considered the heart of Kant's ethics, the formulation "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." I am referring to the human capacity to make moral decisions according to pure practical reason (Kerstein 2-5).

[10] Moral philosophers would very likely object to my similar treatment of utilitarianism and Kant's deontology. In fact, many would object to my putting both of those moral theories under the rubric of "decision theory." I do recognize that utilitarianism's focus on ends rather than means is quite different than deontological ethic's focus on the rightness of the act itself. However, as it is not the purpose of this thesis to compare Mahāyāna Buddhism with utilitarianism or deontological ethics in detail, I am here only discussing a similar rational process related to the status of rules that exists in both theories.

making. A Bodhisattvas acts are indeed goal-oriented actions, however, the goal is other-centered rather than a self-centered. The activity of saving all sentient beings, the goal of an enlightened Mahāyānist, is achieved selflessly, which changes the character of what is meant by the term "goal" into something not recognizable as a decision theory. This discussion of a Bodhisattvas's goal-oriented activity will be continued in the final chapter of this thesis.

In arguing for Mahāyāna as a decision theory, one might argue the Buddhist precepts are codes of conduct one follows in order to reach the goal of enlightenment. However, there is more to "achieving" Nirvana than following a set of guidelines, though the precepts do play a very important role. Reaching Nirvana requires shedding the self/other distinction, and achieving a state of "non-duality" or "no-self." Shedding the self/other distinction is not a step-by-step calculation; in fact, it is this very calculating mind that must be broken through. It is not useful to call Mahāyāna a decision theory since it is not clear that strictly following a set of rules is what allows for release from *saṃsāra*. This kind of strict rule-following is an essential element of ethics as decision theory and it does not exist in the same way in Mahāyāna. As Robert Aitken has described in his writing on the Buddhist precepts, there are two ways of looking at these rules, one pre-enlightenment and one post-enlightenment. Pre-enlightenment one must work hard to follow the precepts, however post-enlightenment one's activity is naturally that of being the living embodiment of those rules. From the standpoint of Nirvana, for example, the precepts do not tell one what one should do, rather they describe enlightened activity (Aitken, 78-80). It is my belief that the lack of

ethical agent and the descriptive nature of precepts post-enlightenment are two strong reasons Mahāyāna Buddhism should not be described as a decision theory.

As we have seen above, forcing Mahāyāna Buddhism to fit within a Western category of ethics – even virtue ethics or decision theory which are in a sense the closest one can get - is difficult and, in my opinion, a task biased by prioritizing the standpoint of selfhood. However, it is going too far to say that applying the term "ethics" to Buddhism is not possible. Often, Western scholars seek to find a single principle for making ethical decisions in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and finding that the most easily identified concepts – Nirvana and *śūnyatā* – seem to conflict with normative ethics, they often balk at the very idea of "Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics." The next two sections will outline this problem and show ways in which scholars are currently working to solve them. This will pave the way for Nishitani Keiji's philosophy to address these common concerns.

1.3. Nirvana and ethics

The problems that arise for the Buddhist ethicist relating to Nirvana and *śūnyatā* are interrelated and difficult to talk about separately. In the next two sections I have attempted to separate ethical quandaries relating to Nirvana and *śūnyatā*, though most problems that arise with one arise with the other. The reason I have divided the two is to discuss separately the subjective experience of enlightenment and the objective reality that is experienced. I am following Daniel

Palmer, who argues that: "if Nirvana represents the existential awakening to the true nature of things, then *śūnyatā* designates the ultimate ontological reality that one is awakened to" (Palmer 122). In this section, I am trying to only discuss ethical problems raised by positing Nirvana as the subjective soteriological goal of Buddhist practice. Problems related to ontology will be discussed in the next section, including problems that arise from the doctrine of dependent origination. Specific problems to be discussed in this section are as follows:

a) Nirvana is beyond good and evil

b) The individualistic interpretation of Nirvana

One of the most common reasons Mahāyāna soteriology is thought to conflict with its normative ethics is misunderstanding Nirvana in the Mahāyāna context. When Nirvana is misrepresented as a state transcending morality, problems arise. I do not believe there is any conflict between a Mahāyāna understanding of Nirvana and Mahāyāna normative ethics. In order to outline this problem and show how some scholars are trying to address it, I will first briefly introduce the concept of Nirvana.

What is Nirvana?

In early Indian Buddhism and present day Theravāda Buddhism, Nirvana is traditionally posited as the final aim or goal of Buddhist life. The Pali word "*nibbāna*" literally means the absence of craving, and Nirvana in Sanskrit means "blowing out," understood to mean blowing out the flame of desire (Morgan 111). A Buddhist practitioner emulates the Buddha by seeking Nirvana. In early Indian

and Theravāda Buddhism, Nirvana is presented as a plane of existence separate from the everyday world of *saṃsāra* (Leaman 223). However, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Nirvana should not be conceived of spatially or as a final dwelling place.

In early Indian Buddhism and Mahāyāna, *saṃsāra* represents the ordinary world, which according to the First Noble Truth of Buddhism is the world of suffering. One goal of practice is to escape suffering. Suffering occurs because of ignorance and attachment to things in the world, which are ultimately without independent existence. We are attached to things that bring pleasure, and dislike things that bring pain. As a result of attachment and ignorance, we grant things substantiality which they do not actually have because ultimately all things are empty. Nirvana is an awakening to egolessness, a state where one is unattached to the self. It is an existential awareness of the interdependent nature of all phenomena.

Though early Indian Buddhism and Theravāda share with Mahāyāna the belief that achieving Nirvana means detaching oneself from the notion of the self and its resultant cravings, the character of Nirvana is distinctly different in Mahāyāna. Nirvana in the Mahāyāna tradition is *apratiṣṭhita* (non-dwelling) Nirvana (Nagao 62). This means that Nirvana is not a permanently fixed state, and that those who reach this stage do not abide there. *Apratiṣṭhita* -Nirvana means "to exit from Nirvana and to come down into *saṃsāra*" (Nagao 65). As John Makransky writes:

> In a Mahāyāna mode of understanding, Nirvana is not far away. It is no longer conceived as an unconditioned reality separate from the conditions of ordinary life (*saṃsāra*) to be encountered only after long

> practice of the path. Rather, Nirvana is the empty, radiant nature of life, of this very mind, body, world, directly encountered in the very moment one is prepared to recognize it. For example, as soon as one's construction of inherent "enemy" falls apart in the perception of its emptiness, accompanied by compassion for all who are trapped in such constructs, one glimpses the unconditioned freedom and joy that was always ready at hand in the radiant, empty nature of one's world. (Makransky)

In early Indian and Theravāda sutras, the concept of Nirvana does not involve a return to *saṃsāra*. One could say that the path to realization has two stages in those traditions: escape from *saṃsāra* and entrance into Nirvana. Because Nirvana in the Mahāyāna tradition is not a final resting place, one could say that there are three stages on the path to realization in Mahāyāna.

The three stages of the Mahāyāna path look something like this:[11]

1. *Saṃsāra* is *saṃsāra*, Nirvana is Nirvana (duality)
2. Nirvana (*Apratiṣṭhita*-Nirvana or non-duality)
3. Nirvana is *saṃsāra*, *saṃsāra* is Nirvana (*Apratiṣṭhita*-Nirvana-*saṃsāra*, or the non-duality of duality and non-duality)

Let us take a closer look at these three stages. The first stage is the world of *saṃsāra,* described as the ordinary world of dualities. It is the way we perceive things from the perspective of an individual self – my individual self exists and all other things are separate from me. Furthermore, as a result of perceiving in terms

[11] Though I have derived this tripartite structure primarily from the work of Gadjin Nagao, there is also ample evidence for the third stage in various canonical sources, primarily the Heart Sutra: "form is emptiness and emptiness is form" and the Diamond Sutra "Through the consummation of Incomparable Enlightenment I acquired not even the least thing. This is altogether everywhere, without differentiation or degree." In addition, Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin describes the three stages of his practice in a similar manner: "Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said 'mountains are mountains, waters are waters.' After I got insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, 'Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.' But now, having attained the abode of final rest [that is awakening], I say, 'Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters" (Brown 1).

of dualities, we also reify those dualities, and think the things of the world and our selves have inherent existence. As such, we form attachments to the things of the world. These attachments lead to suffering because, ultimately, the things of the world, including the self, do not exist inherently.

The second stage is Nirvana, the transcending of dualities. Nagao writes that *apratiṣṭhita* also means *advaya*, "non-duality" (Nagao 67). The realization that the things of the world and the self do not inherently exist and are causally interconnected is the realization of their non-duality. Nagao, quoting the *Buddhabhūmi-sutra*, writes: "When the not dwelling Nirvana is realized, there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and Nirvana; they are regarded to be of one taste" (Nagao 67). The complete identity of *saṃsāra* and Nirvana is the second stage on the Mahāyāna path, but because Nirvana is *apratiṣṭhita*-Nirvana, this is not the final stage, as it is in early Indian or Theravāda Buddhism.

The third stage on the Mahāyāna path then is what I am calling *saṃsāra*-is-Nirvana, Nirvana-is-*saṃsāra*, or the non-duality of duality and non-duality. Nagao writes that because Nirvana in the Mahāyāna tradition is *apratiṣṭhita*-Nirvana, non-abiding Nirvana, the Bodhisattva dwells in neither *saṃsāra* nor Nirvana:

> Because the Bodhisattva dwells neither in *saṃsāra* nor in nirvana, for him there is no duality between *saṃskṛta*, the compounded, and *asaṃskṛta*, the uncompounded. Owing to his wisdom, a Bodhisattva relinquishes the compounded and does not enter *saṃsāra*; and, owing to his compassion, he denies the uncompounded and does not enter Nirvana either. (Nagao 67)

The third stage is a kind of trans-descendence, a return from Nirvana to the world with a radically different perspective on reality. Nagao writes that "since not to

dwell in Nirvana is to get away from Nirvana, by implication it means to enter into *saṃsāra*. Thus, a Bodhisattva voluntarily comes into the *saṃsāric* world" (Nagao 68). That the concept of Nirvana in the Mahāyāna tradition does not take the Bodhisattva away from the world, but rather places him distinctly back in the world has direct consequences for understanding Nirvana as a concept that does not transcend ethics.

I will now address the first concern that Nirvana is beyond good and evil using the above formula and concentrating, in particular, on the third stage of the path.

a) Nirvana is beyond good and evil

A major ethical quandary that often arises when discussing Mahāyāna ethics is that if Nirvana involves transcending all dualities, then dualities such as right and wrong, and good and evil are also left behind.[12] Thus, Nirvana is often posited as a final state beyond good and evil and therefore a state beyond ethics. [13]

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[12] Assertions that Nirvana is beyond good and evil are often found in books considered to be foundational in Buddhist studies like What the Buddha Taught. Therein, Rahula writes: "Nirvana is beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is therefore beyond our conceptions of good and evil…" (Rahula 151). These assertions are often also commonly found in general textbooks and encyclopedia entries about Nirvana. For example, in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Society, under the term "Nirvana" it is written: "It [Nirvana] is living beyond good and evil, and actions have no consequences for the actor. In Nirvana person has experiences but remains attached to nothing" (Kivisto and Swatos 66). Not only do writings from an early Indian or Theravāda perspective speak of Nirvana as beyond good and evil, but a prominent Zen scholar, D. T. Suzuki, in his work Introduction to Zen Buddhism wrote that Zen enlightenment is beyond good and evil. It is for this reason that Zen was argued to have no social ethics by many scholars in the early 1990's (Maraldo, section 6).

[13] The Buddha was reluctant to describe Nirvana is substantial terms, and in most sutras it is described in terms of what it is not. However, in arguments to prove that Nirvana is not

In my opinion, this misperception has two aspects: 1. Transcendence being favoured over trans-descendence and 2. The belief that the precepts are abandoned post-enlightenment. Though a large part of this thesis is dedicated to Nishitani Keiji's discussion of Nirvana, I feel it is also important to show that there are currently other scholars in the field of Buddhist ethics working to overcome this particular stereotype.

The soteriological goal of Mahāyāna is often mistaken for the early Indian or Theravāda Buddhist goal of leaving the world of *saṃsāra* behind and remaining in a kind of transcendent state. Though the Mahāyāna path does entail to some extent going beyond good and evil (in the sense of overcoming dualities), the third stage of the path, the non-duality of duality and non-duality, requires that one does not abide in that state of non-duality. In his discussion of this problem, Bret Davis points to the famous statement about non-duality made by Huineng in the *Platform Sutra* "without thinking of good, without thinking of evil….what is [your] original face?" (Yampolsky 110). Davis argues that Huineng's statement points to the truth that in order to awaken to one's "original face" one must overcome all distinctions between good and evil, along with the individual self that cherishes those distinctions. He writes:

> the zealous moralist who does not pass through this radical experience of letting go would remain driven by the three poisons of desirous attachment to whatever has been posited as categorically good, hate of whatever has been posited as categorically wrong, and delusion with respect to the impossibility of categorically reifying reality into discrete

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a state of nothingness (in the sense of nihilism), many writers argue that it is an "ultimate reality" (Gowans 154). For example, Christopher W. Gowans, quoting the *Udāna*, writes that Nirvana "is a reality entirely beyond the whole cycle of rebirth" (Gowans 149). Some studies have shown that laypeople understand Nirvana to be a kind of "superheaven, some final sphere of complete happiness" (Slater 43).

> entities on whose essences fundamentalistic ethical judgments can be passed. (Davis 242-243)

Therefore, there is a sense in which it is important for the sake of ethics, to transcend the conception of right and wrong one inherited from one's society. However, Davis argues that one must pay equal if not more attention to Huineng's more subtle statement "although you see…evil and good, evil things and good things, you must not throw them aside, nor must you cling to them, nor must you be stained by them, but you must regard them as being just like the empty sky" (Davis 243). Though the moment of awakening is an important breakthrough, one should not cling to that moment, but rather what one learns from the realization of non-duality is how to make ethical judgments while remaining unattached to them in a state of non-duality of duality and non-duality. The third stage is without reification, but not without ethical judgment. The point in Mahāyāna is not to favour transcendence over trans-descendence. The point is to return to the world as it is with "a renewed ability to make ethical judgments" (Davis 244). The soteriological aim of Mahāyāna Buddhism is to experience *apratiṣṭhita*-Nirvana, and therefore to actualize the third stage of the path and to live in a world where *saṃsāra* is Nirvana and Nirvana is *saṃsāra*. This idea is expressed succinctly in Zen Sand 16.57: "An ordinary person knows it and becomes a sage; A sage understands it and becomes an ordinary person" (Hori, 2003, 608).

In a world where *saṃsāra* is Nirvana, what should one base one's "renewed ability to make ethical judgments" upon? This question raises the second problem for ethics caused by positing Nirvana as beyond good and evil:

what role do the Buddhist practices and precepts play in Enlightenment? It is often argued that the precepts are abandoned upon Enlightenment. A good example of this belief is the often-cited interpretation of the Parable of the Raft. The Parable of the Raft is a story of a man who, needing to cross a river, fashions himself a raft. Upon reaching the other shore, he wonders if he should carry the raft with him or leave it behind. In the story, the man is told that "the raft is for getting across, not for retaining" and monks are told to "discard even right states of mind and, all the more, wrong states of mind" (Humphreys 86). This passage is generally taken as evidence that once one achieves Nirvana, "ethics as a mere instrument may be jettisoned, and one is then truly beyond good and evil" (Carter 89).

While that interpretation of this passage may be correct for early Indian Buddhism and modern Theravāda because Nirvana is truly separate from *saṃsāra* in those traditions, both Damien Keown and Robert Carter argue that this interpretation must not be applied to Mahāyāna. A Mahāyāna interpretation of this passage would show that ethics are never to be left behind. Keown notes that among the numerous other references to crossing a river on a raft, this is the only one in which the raft, understood as ethics, is left behind. In the other instances the Eightfold path is the raft and Nirvana the other shore (Keown 94-95). Carter writes that the raft is "indispensable in order for us to reach the other shore and live ethically thereafter, but it can become a noose around our moral necks if we focus on it…rather than on the purity of knowing and feeling which yields spontaneous and heartfelt love and compassion…" (Carter 90). Living ethically

and achieving Nirvana are inseparable in Mahāyāna. Carter defers to Rhys Davies who wrote: "*nibbāna* [Nirvana] is purely and solely an ethical state, to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight" (quoted in Keown 91). Because Nirvana is not a transcendent state beyond good and evil in Mahāyāna as it is in earlier Buddhist traditions, but rather involves the unattached descent back into reoriented *saṃsāra*, ethics are essential. Nishitani Keiji's philosophical discussion of his third stage of the Mahāyāna path – *saṃsāra-sive-*Nirvana – is exceptionally useful for clarifying that, in Mahāyāna, Nirvana is not beyond good and evil. This will be described in detail in Chapter Two.

b) The individualistic interpretation of Nirvana

Many scholars write about Nirvana as though it is a thoroughly individualistic experience and goal.[14] According to Daniel Palmer "in the Zen tradition where Nirvana is taken to represent a kind of existential awakening to the non-substantiality of the mundane world there is a definite focus upon the individual's experience that some have claimed is antisocial by nature" (Palmer 121). The soteriological goal of achieving Nirvana is often portrayed as a personal goal, having little to do with the way one relates to other human beings. My explication

[14] Har Dayal criticized the early Indian Buddhists of representing enlightenment as an individualistic goal. He argued that "they seemed to have cared only for their own liberation…were indifferent to the duty of teaching and helping all human beings" (Dayal 2). Gadjin Nagao, citing Dayal, writes that because of the view that Nirvana was an individual goal "Buddhist monks began to neglect the important aspects of Arhatship and became overly self-centered…in short, theirs was a saintly and serene but an inactive and indolent monastic order" (Nagao 61). Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé, in his work Buddhist Ethics, devoted his entire second chapter to "personal liberation" (Tayé 79).

of Nishitani Keiji's philosophy will later show the falsity of this position. Nevertheless, it is again useful to see that scholars in the field of Buddhist ethics also believe that Nirvana is not a personal "goal."

Though it is true that emulating the Buddha in order to achieve Nirvana is a kind of solitary achievement, the only way to reach this state is to see the emptiness of the self, and to see also the interrelationship of all beings. This insight, as I will argue in the next section of this chapter, results in an extensive feeling of compassion for all living beings. As Carter writes, "Nirvana is not just the result of metaphysical insight, nor is it a selfish, individual act. Rather, it is the cultivation of an ethical life, a life of compassionate and sympathetic identification" (Carter 88).

It is my belief that writings about the soteriological aim of Mahāyāna often do not focus on the fact that the goal of Mahāyāna is to save all sentient beings, rather than achieve Nirvana for oneself. Achieving Nirvana is an important stepping stone in order to reach the highest end, that of saving all beings in the world of suffering, otherwise known as the activity of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is the ultimate ethical ideal in Mahāyāna, and the Bodhisattva is not a god-like being beyond good and evil, but a being who, using enlightened insight, works compassionately to save all sentient beings (Nagao 62). I will use Nishitani Keiji's philosophy to show that the Bodhisattva's goal oriented activity is *lived in enlightenment*, where self-regard and other-regard are identical, where Nirvana is *saṃsāra* and *saṃsāra* is Nirvana. The Bodhisattva embodies the truth of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and as such acts in a world where

everything is thoroughly co-penetrated and interdependent. However, before turning to Nishitani, I must discuss the problems for Mahāyāna ethics raised by its ontological position: *śūnyatā*.

1.4. *Śūnyatā* and Ethics

Śūnyatā (空 *kū*), emptiness, is the Buddhist concept that causes the most visceral reactions in Western scholars. Perhaps it is because we tend to associate the term emptiness with nihilism, godlessness, the void, the end of possibilities that we find it difficult to see that a concept such as emptiness holds ethical possibilities. The term *śūnyatā* signifies the emptiness of all things, meaning that nothing has a permanent identity. Palmer writes: "*śūnyatā* as absolute emptiness thus signifies both this process of emptying (by which all entities are ceaselessly transformed) and the lack of any stable, self-subsistent entities or principles that we might take as ontologically basic" (Palmer 123). *Śūnyatā* reveals that everything originates dependent on everything else; nothing is ever really self-sufficient or independent. It is important to note that the concept of *śūnyatā* underwent numerous shifts in meaning as it moved from India to China and Japan.[15]

There are two different ethical problems raised by the doctrine of *śūnyatā*.

[15] For a detailed description of the changes in this concept as it moved to Japan, see Gregory K. Ornatowski's essay "Transformations of 'Emptiness' on the Idea of *Śūnyatā* and the Thought of Abe and the Kyoto School of Philosophy." See also Frederick J. Streng's seminal work Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning, 1967.

a) Why be good if everything is ontologically identical?

b) In *Śūnyatā* and *anatman*: *who* saves and *who* is saved?

a) Why be good if everything is ontologically identical?

Definitely the most common critique of Buddhist ethics is that *śūnyatā*, "emptiness," destroys the concept of ethical action by literally emptying the world of meaning.[16] The term *śūnyatā* is a Mahāyāna word that indicates the insubstantiality of all things. This concept arose out of earlier Buddhist schools' understanding of the chain of causation. In early Indian Buddhism, the universe was understood to have no permanent substratum of existence, but rather "the only true method of explaining any existing thing is to trace one cause back to the next, and so on, without the hope, or even the desire, of explaining the ultimate cause of all things" (Morgan 380). For early Indian Buddhists, this chain of causation revealed the reason we suffer; we suffer because we lack knowledge

[16] I am here referring to the long-standing critique that Buddhism is a form of nihilism. This critique extends as far back as the first modern Western interpreters of Buddhism, Eugene Burnouf, Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire, and Max Müller, who all equate Buddhism with nihilism and Nirvana with annihilation (Becker 25-26). Interestingly, it is not only Buddhist scholars who have made this claim. Nietzsche famously calls Buddhism a respectable form of nihilism. It is "respectable" because Buddhism focuses on self-mastery as a way of facing nihilism without developing *ressentiment* (Berkowitz 109). However, many early modern scholars revised their opinions later in life; those who no longer equate Buddhism with nihilism are Müllern, Hermann Oldenberg, Mrs. Rhys-Davids and La Vallée Poussin (Becker 30). However, much of their early work is still influential in the field, especially that of Mrs. Rhys-Davids and La Vallée Poussin. La Vallée Poussin especially treats "the nihilism of the Mādhyamika school" as "the logically correct interpretation of the Pali texts" (Becker 32).

about causes of things. A deep understanding of causation was thought to bring a practitioner close to Nirvana.

This chain of causation later became the Mahāyāna Buddhist truth of dependent origination (Sanskrit, *pratītyasamutpāda,* Japanese*,* 縁起*, engi*), the interdependence of all causes. Similar to the early Indian chain of causation, everything that "exists" does so in a web of interaction with all other things and nothing exists inherently. Especially in the Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna, dependent origination meant "the interdependence of all phenomena in the universe throughout the past, the present and the future" (Morgan 380). Voidness, *śūnyatā,* is the word used to indicate the fact that all things appear, but are actually empty. Often, *śūnyatā* is misinterpreted as nihilism and as such, as a concept devoid of moral force.

In discussions of *śūnyatā* it is common for scholars to turn to Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK). In very general terms, Nagarjuna argued for the causal interconnectedness of all living things because all things are *śūnyatā,* empty of inherent existence. The ethical debate is over whether or not the "things" which have no independent existence "exist in a mutual or reciprocal sense" (Glass 306). Scholars who argue for mutual or reciprocal causation, tend to use to term "co-dependent" origination, and understand all things to co-dependently create one another. This is what Glass calls an affirmative position on dependent origination and *śūnyatā*. Other scholars argue that: "'emptiness' is not the action of mutual affirmation but the action of endless deferral" (Glass 306). What Glass means by "endless deferral" is a kind of nihility, as "the absence or deferred

presence of all positions" (Glass 306). This endless deferral leaves one immobilized; it is impossible to talk about any one thing without speaking of the entire inter-dependent world. This view can lead to a kind of skepticism about holding any views at all, and this view is dangerous for ethics.

The scholarly conflict is between those who understand the *śūnyatā* of dependent origination as "a mutually established 'position' or 'presence' where things are always both negated and affirmed" or whether one understands the "emptiness" to be a complete absence of any possible position. The former accords with the third stage of the path of Mahāyāna - the reality of *saṃsāra* is Nirvana, Nirvana is *saṃsāra*. In my opinion the latter is nihilism. There is no scholarly resolution over which interpretation is correct. Indeed, this argument has continued since the time of Nagarjuna himself.

In terms of ethics, however, those who hold the position that beings exist in reciprocity and mutual relation are able to take an ethical stance wherein dependent origination ideally leads to action with awareness about how an individual's actions affect all living things.[17] However, those who believe that adopting any position is impossible because emptiness reveals that there is no truth, find *śūnyatā* lacking in ethical content.

I believe Nishitani Keiji's work falls in the former category, however it is not *pratītyasamutpāda* that he refers to, but rather a later concept, the Fourth

[17] This is a common thesis in writings about Buddhism and the environment, and in the field of Engaged Buddhism generally. See Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism by Sallie B. King (University of Hawai'i Press, 2005) as an excellent example.

Dharmadhātu of Huayan Buddhism. [18] The position of scholars who believe that beings exist in reciprocity and mutual relation, however, equally applies to Nishitani's chosen source, which shall be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. In Religion and Nothingness he writes that the interconnected world forms the basis of Bodhisattva activity. Therefore, for Nishitani and for scholars who support an affirmative reading of dependent origination, emptiness ontology is not antithetical to ethics. Rather, the reverse is true. Everything is empty of inherent existence, is dependently originated and interconnected, and this is the way a Bodhisattva perceives the world, not in terms of duality (an individual self looking at other individual selves) or non-duality (everything is one and thus all decisions are relative), but rather as a world in which self-regard *is* other-regard (the duality of duality and non-duality).

b) In *Śūnyatā* and *anatman*: *who* saves and *who* is saved?

Śūnyatā and the Buddhist idea of *anatman* (無我、*muga*), no-self, are interrelated ideas. There is no inherently existing self, and yet in a sense there is an actor who does good deeds and people for whom good actions are done.

[18] If Nishitani Keiji does not directly discuss dependent origination, why have I chosen to discuss it rather than just discuss Huayan Buddhism? I have discussed dependent origination above because writers in the field of Buddhist ethics often strongly rely on an affirmative interpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda* in order to support arguments about a Bodhisattva's compassionate activity. I have yet to read a text that draws solely on Huayan Buddhism to make an argument for ethics, except for Nishitani's Religion and Nothingness. As such, I felt it important to show that within the field of Buddhist ethics in general, there is already one possible resolution to the ethical problem posed by *śūnyatā*. I believe Nishitani's circuminsessional interpenetration, because it is a more radical interpenetration than *pratītyasamutpāda* can be used to make a more forceful argument for the ethical consequences of *śūnyatā*. I will show how this is possible in Chapter Two.

It is important when encountering this idea to keep in mind, again, the third stage of the Mahāyāna path, the non-duality of duality and non-duality. The very practical understanding of the fact that *saṃsāra* is Nirvana and Nirvana is *saṃsāra* is that there are still people going about their everyday activity within *saṃsāra* who need help and still people residing there who can help them.

However, in terms of ethics, the doctrine of *anatman* "calls into question the ordinary human 'self' that functions as the locus of ethical agency" (Ives 39). The main goal of this thesis is to show how using Nishitani one can formulate an ethical theory without an ethical agent at the center. As such, I will not go into further detail here.

1.5. Conclusion

What I have shown above are some common misconceptions that hinder the progress of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics, and brief defenses of Mahāyāna by scholars in this field. It is my feeling that Mahāyāna Buddhists ethicists have a difficult scholarly task. They must carefully sift through a whole history of interpretations of traditional concepts, and ascertain what is applicable to Mahāyāna, what is only applicable to early Indian Buddhism and Theravāda, and what is based on misinterpretation. That the concepts presented above – Nirvana and *śūnyatā* – present stumbling blocks for the Buddhist ethicist is largely based, I believe, upon the fact that scholars often do not identify which Buddhist

perspective they are speaking from. Damien Keown, for example, is certainly correct to assert that early Indian Buddhism closely resembles virtue ethics. However, when he goes so far as to say that "Buddhism" (and hereby including Mahāyāna) is a virtue ethics, problems arise. Though I have discussed some scholars who are working in the field of Mahāyāna ethics to correct some misinterpretations of concepts like Nirvana and *śūnyatā*, it remains true that applying the term "ethics" to Mahāyāna Buddhism still seems to raise a scholarly alarm. I feel this alarm is mistaken, I will use Nishitani's philosophical rendering of these terms to show why.

Furthermore, there is, as yet, no satisfactory existing scholarly reconciliation of Buddhist soteriology, philosophy, and normative ethics – *especially* when considering Mahāyāna Buddhism. This makes the study of Buddhist ethics both an arduous and interesting task. It is difficult for scholars to overcome the desire that Buddhism be a complete, logical system, where philosophical goals align perfectly with moral norms and codes of conduct. It is not illogical to want this, but one should not argue that simply because, on the surface, there is conflict between these two aspects of Mahāyāna that therefore Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics is not possible. Mahāyāna Buddhism has not traditionally engaged in discussion of meta or normative ethics. This, however, does not mean that it is devoid of ethics or ethical thinking.

In the next chapter I will introduce the Kyoto School of Philosophy, Nishitani Keiji, and also show how Nishitani's philosophy can be used reconcile Mahāyāna Buddhist soteriology, ontology, and normative ethics.

Chapter 2: Nishitani Keiji and the Kyoto School

2.1 The Kyoto School: A Brief Introduction

The Kyoto School of philosophy is generally understood to have begun with Nishida Kitarō (西田 幾多郎) and developed in the departments of philosophy and religion at Kyoto University. About Nishida Kitarō, a member of the Kyoto School said: "it is no exaggeration to say that in him Japan had the philosophical genius who was the first to know how to build a system permeated with the spirit of Buddhist meditation by fully employing Western methods of thinking" (Van Bragt xxviii). In his writings, Nishida seeks a synthesis between traditional Buddhist thought and both French positivism and German idealism. This way of thinking was continued and furthered by his disciples at Kyoto University and scholars from around Japan. Many of the writings of the Kyoto School have been translated into Western languages, and though they have gained some popularity, they are primarily known in the West only in small scholarly circles.

There is a current debate about who should be included in the Kyoto "School." One group of scholars, notably Ohashi Ryōsuke, contends that to use the term "school" must mean that all the members share the same concerns. It is suggested that "nothingness", "absolute nothingness", "emptiness (空, *ku*), and place (場所, *basho*) are the themes that identify members of the Kyoto "School".

This group also argues that if the term is meant only to indicate the disciples of Nishida Kitarō, then it is better to use the term "philosophy" rather than "school" (Lam 130). On the other side of the debate, scholars like Fujita Masakatsu and Takeda Atsushi believe that the term Kyoto "school" generally refers to "an intellectual network centering around Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime" (Lam 131). This latter group of scholars is more likely to include members who did not spend their entire careers at Kyoto University, like Watsuji Tetsurō (和辻哲郎), as well as those outside the inner circle of disciples like Tosaka Jun (戸坂潤), Kuki Shūzō (九鬼周造), and Miki Kiyoshi (三木清) as members of the Kyoto School (Lam 131). Common names recognized by both sides as being members of the Kyoto School are: Tanabe Hajime (田辺元), Nishitani Keiji (西谷 啓治), Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (久松真一), Takeuchi Yoshinori (武内義範), and Ueda Shizuteru (上田 閑照) (Franck xviii-xix).

Frederick Franck defines the Kyoto School as "the school of thought, the way of practicing philosophy, of which the main characteristics are: its staunch faithfulness to, and rootedness in, the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, coupled with a complete openness to Western thought and a commitment to bring about a meeting of East and West, a 'unity beyond differences'" (Frank, xviii). Jan Van Bragt, in his translator's introduction to Religion and Nothingness, writes that the Kyoto School is "more of a philosophical ethos than a unified system of thought" (Van Bragt xxviii) but agrees with Franck about the school's basic characteristics: loyalty to its own traditions, openness to Western philosophy and a deliberate attempt to bring together Eastern and Western thought.

Two areas of religious influence can be seen within the Kyoto School. Nishida Kitarō and his direct disciples generally use Zen Buddhism as a basis for making comparisons, while Tanabe Hajime and his disciples tend to use Pure Land Buddhism. Nishitani Keiji, a student of both Nishida and Tanabe, generally relies on Zen Buddhism, though some aspects of his work have a clear Pure Land influence.

In terms of Western philosophy, most members of the Kyoto School were influenced by German philosophy, especially the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Several members actually studied with Heidegger in Germany: Tanabe Hajime, Kuki Shūzō and Nishitani Keiji. Relating existentialism and Buddhism, a common theme among the three major thinkers of this school – Nishida, Tanabe and Nishitani – is Absolute Nothingness. The online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on the Kyoto School's main philosophical concepts begins with a quotation about Nishida and Tanabe by Nishitani:

> "[Their] philosophies share a distinctive and common basis that sets them apart from traditional Western philosophy: Absolute Nothingness….Clearly the idea of Absolute Nothingness came to awareness in the spirituality of the East; but the fact that it has also been posited as a foundation for philosophical thought represents a new step virtually without counterpart in the history of Western philosophy." (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/#AbsNotGivPhiForFor)

When Western philosophers write about ontology, the question they generally ask is "what is being?" However, when members of the Kyoto school write about ontology, the question they ask is "what is nothingness?" Nishida Kitarō's philosophy centered on the "place of Absolute Nothingness" (絶対無の場所, *zettai-mu no basho*) and Tanabe Hajime wrote in his most famous work, Philosophy as Metanoetics, about Absolute Nothingness as the Other-Power of

Absolute Mediation. Nishitani Keiji wrote extensively about the fields of nihility and *śūnyatā*. Though I do not have the space to write about each thinker here, it is fair to say that a major ontological impulse behind much of Kyoto School philosophy is the meaning of and place of Absolute Nothingness. This thesis will reveal the ethical connotations of this concept.

2.2. Nishitani Keiji: An introduction[19]

Nishitani Keiji (西谷 啓治) was born on February 27, 1900 in a small town in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan. He did most of his early schooling in Tokyo but at sixteen became sick with tuberculosis and had to spend the year until he was seventeen recuperating. During that time he read books on Zen, including the work of D. T. Suzuki. Nishitani read widely in his youth, especially works of Western philosophy, history and literature while continuing his interest in Zen. He also encountered Nishida Kitarō's Philosophical Contemplation and Experience (思索と体験, *shisaku to taiken*) during these years and was inspired to study under Nishida and Tanabe at Kyoto University, where he wrote his thesis on Schelling. After graduation in 1924 he taught high school philosophy for eight years, and in 1928 became a professor at Kyoto's Ōtani University until 1935. He published extensively on Schelling, Kant, Aristotle, Plotinus and Dilthey, though primarily his interest was in the religious dimensions of existentialism.

[19] Unless otherwise stated, the biographical information in this section is from James W. Heisig's work *Philosophers of Nothingness*, from a section titled "Nishitani's life and career" pages 183-187.

He found, however, that philosophy did not entirely answer his religious questions, and in 1936 he began to focus intently on Zen. He began to practice at Shōkoku-ji temple under Yamazaki Taikō Rōshi, and he continued this practice for twenty-four years. Heisig writes: "Zen became a permanent feature of his life, though not initially of academic interest. Rather, it was a matter, as he liked to say, of a balance between reason and letting go of reason, of 'thinking and then sitting, sitting and then thinking'" (Heisig 184).

At the age of thirty-seven he traveled to the University of Freiberg where he spent two years studying with Martin Heidegger, and attending his lectures on Nietzsche. When he returned to Japan at the age of forty-three, he assumed the principal chair of religion at Kyoto University but in 1946, he was forced to take a leave of absence from teaching, and was deemed an "unsuitable" teacher by the Occupation authorities. He was also banned from holding any public position on the grounds of having supported the wartime government.

He intensified his Zen practice during this time, and wrote a number of his most famous works, including God and Absolute Nothingness (神と絶対無, *Kami to zettai mu)* and Nihilism (ニヒリズム, *Nihirizumu).* Five years after being relieved of his position, at the age of fifty-two, Nishitani was reinstated as chair of religion, and six years later he became the chair of the history of philosophy. He was asked to write an essay on the topic 'What is Religion?' and this resulting series of essays was published in Japanese in 1961 under the same name, *Shukyō to wa nanika* (宗教とは何か). This is considered by many to be Nishitani's masterpiece, and Jan Van Bragt translated it into English in 1982 with

the title Religion and Nothingness. This book was an important milestone in the introduction of the Kyoto School of philosophy to a Western audience. Nishitani retired from Kyoto University in 1963 and taught at Ōtani University until 1971. During this time he served as editor of The Eastern Buddhist, and earned many awards for scholarly achievement. He died in 1990 at his home in Kyoto.

In his most famous work, Religion and Nothingness, Nishitani Keiji interprets the Buddhist tradition philosophically in ways that do not always coincide with received scholarship. He had a very personal relationship with the Zen tradition, which helped him to wrestle with his lifelong struggle with nihility. Indeed, Nishitani was so engrossed in the study of nihilism that he is said to have carried a copy of Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra around with him wherever he went.[20] Nishitani described his delving into the German idealists and western existentialists at the beginning of his career as causing him to feel "a great void" inside himself (quoted in Heisig 191). As his focus on Zen meditation developed, his philosophical interests began to shift and he began to articulate his philosophy in terms of an experience of "the bottom dropping out from under one" and the "conversion of this experience from a negation of life to its reaffirmation" (Heisig 191). Nishitani's combination of Zen and existentialism is of philosophical interest not only because of his astute scholarship, but also because he came to his philosophy from a state of despair, nihility and negativity. As result, his philosophy reflects not only his mind but also his restless spirit which itself is a

[20] Graham Parkes, in his Introduction to The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism, referred to a conversation he had with Nishitani about Nietzsche. Nishitani said: "As a young man, I used to carry Thus Spoke Zarathustra around with me wherever I went – it was like my Bible" (Parkes xx).

reflection of the human condition as represented by Buddhism. Nishitani wrote: "my decision…to study philosophy was in fact – melodramatic as it might sound – a matter of life and death" (quoted in Heisig 191). Thus, his investigation of subjectivity and the re-appropriation of religion for the modern age in his philosophical works has much of the flavour and flare of a Zen master like Dōgen or Hakuin's writings about life and death, making his work not only accessible and interesting, but also highly relevant for our age of technological nihilism and religious apathy.

More specifically, his appropriation and reinterpretation of the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism at the conclusion of Religion and Nothingness is particularly relevant. Not only can it invigorate the current nihilistic and dry analytical state of both philosophical and religious studies in the West, but the way in which his philosophy can be used to present a Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics is particularly relevant to many current movements such as Engaged Buddhism. By clearly explicating in philosophical terms why one should care, for example, about human interconnectedness in relation to moral behavior, he is able to bring Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas into forums where those ideas may have been dismissed as out of currency – in philosophy departments convinced that religion and philosophy must remain distinct, for example. His arguments can also be applied to the current teachings about peace by H.H. the Dalai Lama, for example, and his philosophical language can allow those teachings reach the ears of a different kind of audience. Also, in perhaps a smaller, though no less important way, Nishitani's reinterpretation of specific Zen concepts provides a

useful resource for interpreting the Zen tradition, and revealing that Zen and ethics are not antithetical.

2.3. An Introduction to Religion and Nothingness

In Religion and Nothingness, Nishitani Keiji challenges the dominance of nihilism in Western philosophy. He argues that this position must be overcome in order for the ennui of modern man to be assuaged. For Nishitani, the solution to nihilism, or relative nothingness, lies in religion, specifically the insights Zen Buddhism has into emptiness, or what he calls absolute nothingness. Indeed, overcoming nihilism is a continual theme in Nishitani's work. Before Religion and Nothingness, Nishitani wrote The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism, which many see as the introduction to Religion and Nothingness. In The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism, Nishitani compliments Nietzsche for recognizing clearly the nihility of modern European culture and then says that Nietzsche himself did not really overcome that nihility (Nishitani, 1990, 179). Nishitani's solution was that nihility had to overcome itself (Nishitani, 1990, 90).

To reveal how this overcoming takes place, Nishitani begins Religion and Nothingness by revealing that religion should not be understood in terms of utility, but in terms of the need human beings have to return to the elemental source of life. Religion, he argues, cannot be understood from a detached, scholarly standpoint, but can only be understood in terms of an individual's religious quest. He begins by asking the question "what is Religion?" but finds

this an ego-centered question, though the egocentricity is disguised in the language of scholarship. He understands that to find the answer this kind of questioning is useful, but limited. He, therefore, changes the question, and asks "what am I to Religion?" This type of question is immediately personal, and causes one to be assailed by the question, "why do I exist?" (Nishitani 2-3). This type of question immediately challenges egocentricity.[21]

An introduction to the philosophical content of Religion and Nothingness need necessarily begin with a discussion of Nishitani's three fields of existence: the field of consciousness (意識の立場, *ishiki no tachiba*), the field of nihility (虚無の立場, *kyomu no tachiba*), and the field of *śūnyatā* (空の立場, *kū no tachiba*). These three fields coincide with the three parts of the path in Mahāyāna.[22] The field of consciousness is *saṃsāra*, or duality. The field of nihility is Nirvana, or non-duality. Finally, the field of *śūnyatā* is the field of "*saṃsāra* is Nirvana" or the non-duality of duality and non-duality.[23] Nishitani's use of the term "field" is metaphorical.

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[21] It is also the beginning of the Great Doubt, which I will discuss later in this section.

[22] Nishitani refers to Mahāyāna thought in his chapter "Nihility and *Sūnyatā*" wherein he first explains his three fields. Fred Dallimayr has argued that Nishitani's three fields are derived from Mahāyāna Buddhism. He writes that Nishitani's understanding of *śūnyatā* "has deep roots in the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism with its opposition to the subject-object split and all kinds of conceptual bifurcation" (Dallimayr 42). Indeed, to explain both the fields of nihility and *śūnyatā*, Nishitani heavily relies on references to Buddhist sutras and the sayings of Zen Masters.

[23] It is in his explanations of the field of *śūnyatā* that Nishitani relies most heavily on the Mahāyāna tradition. He equates his most important term for *śūnyatā,* "being-*sive*-nothingness," with the Mahāyāna expression "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (Nishitani 97).

Ordinary human existence, according to Nishitani, plays out on the field of consciousness (意識の立場, *ishiki no tachiba*), what Mahāyāna Buddhists refer to as *saṃsāra* or the world of duality. Human beings proceed from task to task, always thinking about the world in terms of subject/object or self/other. Nishitani writes: "to look at things from the standpoint of the self is always to see things merely as objects, that is, to look at things *without* from a field *within* the self" (Nishitani, 1983, 9). This standpoint of the separation of subject and object is the definition of the field of consciousness. It is a field where we are constantly making distinctions and reifying them. Quite simply, this refers to the simple act of defining a chair as a chair, and taking "chair-ness" to be the essence of a piece of wood with four legs and a back. We do this because, on this field, "self always occupies center stage" (Nishitani 9). Nishitani writes that it is because we are separated from the things of the world, that on this field we are also separated from ourselves; "precisely because we face things on a field separated from things and to the extent that we do so, we are forever separated from ourselves" (Nishitani 10). He argues that in modern times the standpoint of the autonomous individual has been given prominence not just in philosophy but also in our personal lives (Nishitani 10).[24]

The major error in modern philosophy for Nishitani lies with Descartes. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* not only places the self at the centre of the universe, but in doing so it also denies the natural world a connection with the ego. In other

[24] "This standpoint, which we may best call the self-contradiction of reality, has come to exercise a powerful control over us, never more so since the emergence of subjective autonomy of the ego in modern times" (Nishitani 10).

words, the mechanistic view of the world is a result of giving primacy to the field of consciousness, and this has had negative consequences for the world – including each individual becoming "a lonely but well fortified island floating on a sea of dead matter" (Nishitani 11). However, the very existence of this field of consciousness is poised on the brink of the field of nihility (虚無の立場, *kyomu no tachiba*).

It is only when something happens that jars our sense of reality – the death of someone we care about, the loss of love etc. – that we ever feel uncertainty about our own existence.[25] This uncertainty causes us to question who we are. Nishitani writes: "when we become a question to ourselves…this means that nihility has emerged from the ground of our existence" (Nishitani 4). By nihility (虚無, *kyomu*), Nishitani means to indicate the existential condition of the modern world or "that which renders meaningless the meaning of life" (Nishitani 4). This realization of nihility is not a self-conscious realization, but rather is a breaking through of the field of consciousness to the field of nihility; "only when the self breaks through the field of consciousness, the field of beings, and stands on the ground of nihility is it able to achieve a subjectivity that can in no way be objectified. This is the elemental realization that reaches deeper than self-consciousness" (Nishitani 16). The form this realization takes is that one sees the self and the things of the world as made null (無化, *muka*).

For Nishitani, this is not merely an individual psychological event, though it is most likely triggered by a traumatic experience of some sort. More

[25] "We come to the realization of death and nihility when we see them within ourselves as constituting the basis of our life and existence" (Nishitani 16).

importantly, it is "the self-presentation of…what is actually concealed at the ground of the self and of everything in the world" (Nishitani 17). In other words, the realization of the field of nihility is different from ordinary doubts we might have in our daily life. This is all-encompassing doubt, where the field of consciousness and all its definitions are doubted at once. For Nishitani, "it is not merely that the self doubts everything, but that the self becomes the doubt" (Nishitani 19). This is what Nishitani refers to, using Zen Buddhist terminology, as the Great Doubt (大擬, *taigi*). Ordinary doubt is directed at objects: I doubt this teaching, I doubt this teacher, I doubt this method, etc. Great Doubt is directed back at the self. Great Doubt asks the question: what am I? Nishitani says it is called "Great" because it is doubt presented as the reality of the world (Nishitani 18). It is by experiencing Great Doubt – doubting the inherent existence of absolutely everything all at once - that one encounters one's "spiritual reality" (Nishitani 18). When one stops perceiving the world in terms of self and object, one can finally perceive the true reality of the world, its suchness (如実, *nyojitsu*).

The field of nihility (虚無の立場, *kyomu no tachiba*) transcends ordinary consciousness because it is not merely that the self doubts everything, but that the self *becomes* the doubt (Nishitani 19). The field of consciousness has been entirely erased and only the question remains, not the questioner. This is Nishitani's explanation of "achieving" Nirvana.[26] The "self" as agent has been

[26] Nishitani argues that when one has an existential "*realization* of nihility" that is the experience of Nirvana. He writes: "For only in the existential confrontation with nihility do we see the earnest life-or-death struggle for the transcendence of birth-and-death, escape from the unending causality of karma, and attainment of the "yonder shore"

dropped off and all that remains is the emptiness of things. However, this is not a permanent state for Nishitani. One can push further to an experience of Absolute Nothingness, or fall back into the field of consciousness. What happens when one falls back into the field of consciousness is that one experienced nihility without a total loss of "self." Nishitani writes: "Nihility is always a nihility for self existence, that is to say, a nihility that we contact when we posit ourselves on the side of the "existence" of our self-existence" (Nishitani 96). We fall back into the field of consciousness when we represent nihility as something outside of the existence of the things of the world and the self, as some *thing* called nihility. Nishitani argues that Western philosophers like Sartre and Nietzsche are unable to rid themselves of this kind of dualistic thinking about nothingness (Nishitani 55-56).[27]

The field of *śūnyatā* (空の立場, *kū no tachiba*) is the field of absolute emptiness. When emptiness is emptied even of the standpoint that represents it as a 'thing' called emptiness, that is *śūnyatā*. The Buddhist understanding of *śūnyatā* is described by Nishitani as "the point at which we become manifest in our own suchness as concrete human beings, as individuals with both body and personality. And at the same time, it is the point at which everything around us becomes manifest in its own suchness" (Nishitani 90). *Śūnyatā* is fundamentally not a kind of transcendent Nirvana where one leaves the world of suffering

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beyond the fathomless sea of suffering. It is, in other words, the struggle for Nirvana" (Nishitani 174).

[27] Nishitani argues that Nietzsche's position is "far more comprehensive and penetrating than Sartre's" but also argues that in both, nothingness has been "subjectivized" (Nishitani 55-56).

behind. The field of *śūnyatā* is distinctly in the world of birth and death, but it is the standpoint of a human being's original countenance (本来の面目, *honrai no menmoku*), what Nishitani calls our homeground (もと、*moto*) and what I have been calling the third stage on the Mahāyāna path.

This original countenance, or homeground, existed also in the fields of consciousness and nihility, but could not be actualized there due to our misperceiving the world in terms of self and other. The standpoint of *śūnyatā* is a field that is disentangled from the self-attachment that exists on the field of consciousness (Nishitani 106).[28] Furthermore, realizing one's original countenance or "returning to one's homeground" in Nishitani's language means being cut off from all representation by the ego. The ego that once regarded appearances as reality has been broken through, and also the ego that then tried to represent things as nullified *things* has also been broken through. Nishitani writes: "things cannot be actual without being deactualized; things cannot really exist except as unreal. Indeed, it is in their very unreality that things are originally real" (Nishitani 109). This standpoint is where the "existence of things is seen to be at one with the existence of the subject itself by the subject that has become its original subjectivity" (Nishitani 109-110). This is known in Buddhism as the

[28] "It is the field of essential disentanglement from the self-attachment spoken of earlier. In a word, it is the field of what Buddhist teaching calls *emancipation*, or what Eckhart refers to as *Abgeschiedenbeit* ("detachment")" (Nishitani 106).

standpoint of no-self, and Nishitani uses the term "non-ego" to represent this concept.[29]

What does living as a non-ego feel like? To have nihility as one's being rather than selfhood is what Nishitani calls emptiness on the "the near side."[30] This experience of true emptiness means that emptiness is "nothing less than what reaches awareness in all of us as our own absolute self-nature" (Nishitani 106). In other words, on the near side the self realizes emptiness (and not a "thinged" version of emptiness) as itself (though not "self" in terms of ego) and we experience what Nishitani calls a "knowing of not-knowing" (Nishitani 110). Nishitani describes life on the near side as being-*sive*-nothingness.

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[29] In describing nihility and *śūnyatā* Nishitani writes thus: "the real Form of suchness means a cutting off from all representation or thought and does not admit of prehension by the ego. It is what is known in Buddhism as the 'unattainable' mode of being, wherein something is what it is on its own homeground" (Nishitani 106-107). Later in Religion and Nothingness, Nishitani begins to use the term "non-ego" when he is describing "the self that is the self because it is not the self." This term is used from page 196 to the end of the book. Jan Van Bragt notes that the reason he translates 無我 as "non-ego" rather than "no-self" is that Nishitani distinguishes between the term "ego" and "self" and opts for "non-ego" when referring to the Sanskrit word *anatman* (Nishitani 300).

[30] According to Nishitani, we usually perceive the world in terms of self and other; the "other" is the "far side" and the "self" is the "near side". However, the original self, the empty self, finds that everything that was once perceived as "other" is actually "neither I nor other" (Nishitani 74). This is the standpoint of absolute selfhood, or emptiness experienced on the "near side". Jan Van Bragt believes Nishitani uses the language of the "near side" to "combat possible misunderstandings that might arise concerning the 'field of emptiness' as something that exists apart from things, lying beyond or behind things, and to combat every possible idea of a world beyond this everyday world" (Nishitani xliv). The realization of emptiness that Nishitani speaks of is not apart from daily existence, but a realization on the "near side." "The self in this absolute selfhood is not what is ordinarily termed the personal or conscious 'self' or 'ego,' and yet again does not exist as something other than that personal or conscious self" (Nishitani 74). For Nishitani, emptiness on the "near side" means that man is "an appearance with nothing at all behind it to make an appearance" (Nishitani 74).

I will pause for a moment to discuss the term *sive*. *Sive* is the translator's representation of the Japanese term *soku (*卽).[31] It is a term used to describe the reciprocity of things (Nishitani 303) and their non-objectifiable oneness (Nishitani 289). Nishitani writes:

> When we say 'being-*sive*-nothingness"…we do not mean that what are initially conceived of as being on the one side and nothingness on the other side have been joined together. In the context of Mahāyāna thought, the primary principle of which is to transcend all duality emerging from logical analysis, the phrase 'being-*sive*-nothingness' requires that one take up the stance of the '*sive'* and from there view being as being and nothingness as nothingness…it is here that emptiness, as a standpoint of absolute non-attachment liberated from this double confinement, comes into the fore. (Nishitani 97)

Here we can see that *sive* is meant to indicate that both being and nothingness are co-present and structurally inseparable from each other. True emptiness is not something other than being, but rather emptiness and being are neither identical nor different.

For a more concrete example of life on the homeground as being-*sive*-nothingness, let us turn to Nishitani's explanation of the being of an eye (Nishitani 152-153). The physical act of the eye not seeing itself is a useful metaphor for the self on the field of *śūnyatā*. Nishitani writes that an eye is an eye because it cannot see itself. Quite literally our physical eye cannot roll back in its socket and perceive its own viscous existence. An eye can see other things, can be itself, fulfill its purpose as an eye, because it cannot see itself. For Nishitani, this

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[31] A famous example is found in the Heart Sutra: *shiki soku ze kū*, "form itself is emptiness." In his translators note for Religion and Nothingness, Jan Van Bragt notes that Nishitani "frequently repeats the terms connected with *sive* in reverse order to stress their reciprocity; for example, 'being-*sive*-nothingness,' 'nothingness-*sive*-being' (Nishitani 303). His purpose is to show that Nishitani does not use this term to indicate what is normally conceived of as "oneness." Rather, "the oneness in question here is absolutely nonobjective and absolutely nonobjectifiable" (Nishitani 289).

means there is an "essential not-seeing" present in the act of seeing (Nishitani 152). It is important to understand that this does not mean that an eye has an essential nothingness (in terms of non-existence) present in its activity. That would be blindness and would exist on the field of nihility.[32] Nishitani does not mean literal blindness in this metaphor; "it is not the objective phenomenon of sightlessness" (Nishitani 153). He means that an eye can be an eye, do what it does (see), because it is always looking outward. If it did see itself, that would be all that it sees. For an eye to be a good eye, one that sees, not-seeing *itself* is fundamental.

What is important about the eye metaphor is what it says about the field of consciousness in relation to the field of *śūnyatā* in Nishitani's work. The fact that what we call "seeing" on the field of consciousness is at bottom, not-seeing, is Nishitani's way of describing the "original mode of being" (本来のありかた, *honrai no arikata*) of things on the field of consciousness. Most fundamentally here, however, is the fact that original emptiness is not separate from the fact that seeing is seeing. Nishitani writes: "that seeing is a groundless activity (empty already from its own-ground) means that seeing, strictly speaking, is seeing bottomlessly. Even the ordinary activity of sight is, as it were, an 'action of non-action'" (無作の作、*musa no sa*) (Nishitani 153). This also means what we are on the homeground (how we are *originally* もともと、*motomoto*) is not separate from the fact that we are human beings with bodies living in the world.

[32] This would be nihility because on the field of nihility, nothingness is no*thing*ness in contrast to some*thing*. Blindness is a term married to sight. Blindness is one side of the duality of seeing and not seeing. It is for this reason that what Nishitani means by "not-seeing" in this metaphor should not be called blindness.

Nishitani's field of *śūnyatā* corresponds with the third stage of the path in Mahāyāna as explicated in Chapter One. Nirvana and *saṃsāra* are not a unity nor wholly separate for Nishitani. The field of *śūnyatā* is a field of *saṃsāra-sive-*Nirvana. Compellingly, Nishitani writes:

> Our self remains through to the end the very self we are conscious of and know about, the everyday self with its bodily behavior, its joys and its wrath, its sorrows and its pleasures, busy employing its discernment and keeping active in social life. It is the self that is the self. Hence finally, concretely speaking, the point of self-identity, at which 'to be a self' and 'not to be a self' are one, is nothing other than the self in itself. (Nishitani 157)

An astute reader is now wondering how to reconcile the above statement with ethics. How is it possible to be good if our true self is our self as it is now – with its joys and its wrath? In the next section, I will begin to answer this question in detail. For now it is important to remember that for this answer one must first understand the Buddhist aspect of Nishitani's description. It may be true that our self as it is in *saṃsāra* remains – conscious, corporeal etc – however, from the standpoint of non-duality, that self is an illusion. Nishitani writes: "no matter how objectively true these phenomena are in themselves (for instance, as scientific cognition), in truth they are essentially illusory appearances" (Nishitani 157). In other words, on the field of *śūnyatā*, where these things are one with emptiness, all that is is a "true suchness (*tāthatā*)" (Nishitani 157). When anything is on its own homeground it is bottomless (無底, *mutei*), empty. "Ultimate truth" is bottomlessness itself. Yet it is important to remember that bottomlessness must not be reified, for then it too becomes an illusory appearance. Rather than bottomlessness as a reified concept, Nishitani is speaking of absolute emptiness, or the non-duality of duality and non-duality.

To understand the activities performed by such a self, one must understand how the self on the homeground interacts with all other selves and the things of the world. In order to explain this aspect of the field of *śūnyatā* it is important to introduce one more term: circuminsessional interpenetration (回互的相入, *egoteki sōnyū*).

To create his concept of circuminsessional interpenetration, Nishitani likely drew on the Huayan Buddhist idea of the unhindered interpenetration of thing and thing, what I believe to be an extension of the early philosophy of dependent origination. In the Huayan teaching on totality, the fourth Dharmadhātu is the Dharmadhātu of the Non-Obstruction of Shih against Shih – the unhindered interpenetration of thing and thing (Chang 142). Not a simple unity like Nirvana, the Fourth Dharmadhātu infinitely includes "each and every thing [and] simultaneously includes all the rest of Shih [things] and Li [principles] in perfect completion…at all times. To see one object is, therefore, to see all objects and vice versa" (Chang 156). This is a description of what Nishitani calls the interpenetrated world-nexus; in this Fourth Dharmadhātu every atom, because it is empty of inherent existence, actually contains the infinite objects and principles of the cosmos. However, each thing also retains its uniqueness for from this standpoint "it is one and also many; it is the dweller and also the world that is dwelt upon" (Chang 154). For Nishitani, that all things also retain their uniqueness in this relationship of emptiness is what makes the relationship of circuminsessional interpenetration one of *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana.

Circuminsessional interpenetration, therefore, is Nishitani's term for the world-as-it-is, where uniqueness and interrelatedness are taken together.

To explain circuminsessional interpenetration, Nishitani utilizes the terminology of master and servant. He begins by stating: "that a thing actually *is* means that it is absolutely unique" and, furthermore, that it is unique means "it is situated in the absolute center of all things" (Nishitani 147). He refers to the unique thing as existing "in the position of master, with all other things positioned relative to it as servants" (Nishitani 147). To explain terms that first seem to conflict, Nishitani argues that thinking on the field of consciousness (dualistic thinking) cannot comprehend how a thing is both master of all and servant to all. This can only occur on the field of *śūnyatā*. He introduces 'circuminsessional' (回互的, *egoteki*) in the following statement:

> 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. We may call this relationship, which is possible only on the field of *śūnyatā*, 'circuminsessional'. (Nishitani 148)

The position of servant in this relationship is meant to indicate that the thing in question exists in the homeground of all other things, "as…a retainer upholding his lord", or by making it to be what it is (Nishitani 148). The position of servant is a negation of a thing's uniqueness, and, therefore, its 'being.' Existence as servant fundamentally means existing as emptiness, or existing with "non-self nature" (Nishitani 148). However, since every master is also a servant, the term 'master' here simply is used to indicate the individual (though not independent) aspect of a thing. Most important is the fact that this uniqueness is based on subordination "to" all other things; "its autonomy comes about only on a

standpoint from which it makes all other things to be what they are, and in so doing is emptied of its own being" (Nishitani 148). Therefore, the position of unity in *śūnyatā* is grounded on the fact that each thing contains all other things because all things are empty**.**

I have attempted a brief introduction to Nishitani's terminology in order to prepare my reader for his argument about the field of *śūnyatā* and ethics. It is most important to remember that on the field of *śūnyatā* "the center is everywhere". Being a no-self fundamentally means that what we commonly refer to as a "self" has its true selfness only in the homeground of all other things. Each and every thing on its own homeground has this same emptiness at its center. This means that the self on this field cannot be self-centered like the ego self of the field of consciousness. However, not all that we treasure about the field of consciousness – knowledge, feeling, decision-making – is eradicated on the field of *śūnyatā*. As Nishitani writes "the identity of 'being' and 'knowing' is more primal than traditional metaphysics has taken it to be." (Nishitani 163)

Nishitani provides important tools to his reader by using terms like the field of *śūnyatā*, the homeground and circuminsessional interpenetration. He gives them the philosophical language necessary to comprehend Buddhist insights. An astute reader can do many things with this terminology. One can discuss the philosophical problem of Western nihilism from an intelligent and fresh perspective, therefore allowing for the possibility of solving some aspects of this modern dilemma through this kind of insight. On a smaller scale, one can use

this terminology to reveal that there is a link between Nishitani's ontology and the field of Buddhist ethics. I intend to show how that is possible in this next section.

2.4 Drawing an ethics out of Nishitani

In this section I will expound Nishitani Keiji's understanding of the interrelationship between *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana and *śūnyatā*. After presenting his ideas, I will explain how his philosophical interpretation of these concepts renders them applicable to the formulation of a Mahāyāna ethics, and addresses many of the critiques I discussed in Chapter One. I will first look at circuminsessional interpenetration and show that Nishitani's explication of this concept aligns well with the positive reading of the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of dependent origination. I feel this is a fruitful point to begin looking at Nishitani's ethics because I believe that *realizing* circuminsessional interpenetration, in Nishitani's dual sense of 'making real' and 'understanding',[33] necessarily carries with it the call to be compassionate according to Nishitani's ontology.

For Nishitani, on the field of *śūnyatā* all things are one, but multiplicity is also not eradicated. Nishitani argues: "each thing in its own selfness shows the mode of being of the center of all things. Each and every thing becomes the center of all things and, in that sense becomes an absolute center" (Nishitani 146). However, all things are the absolute center "as a totality of absolute centers"

[33] Nishitani finds a double meaning in the English word "realization." Jan Van Bragt writes: "On the one hand [realization has] the sense of actualization or manifestation, and on the other that of appropriation or apprehension" (Nishitani 302).

(Nishitani 146). This can only happen on the field of *śūnyatā* where all things are empty and, therefore, can both be the center of all things and be one. All things are one on this field because all things on their homeground are empty. *Śūnyatā* makes possible multiplicity and, therefore, is not a field of simple unity, but rather *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana. This indicates that multiplicity is present simultaneously with unity and because of emptiness; all things on the field of *śūnyatā* are also fully individual, though not independent, things. This shows that Nishitani does not conceive of the world as a simple unity, but as a world of the non-duality of duality and non-duality, or *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana. It is incorrect to say that *śūnyatā* eradicates "truth" and therefore that ethics is not possible. This is a misinterpretation of *śūnyatā*.

In addition, I believe the *realization* of circuminsessional interpenetration has direct ethical consequences. Anne C. Klein writes that when one does not understand dependent origination correctly "one presumes an ontological independence of self and other that leads to an experiential abyss between self and other" (Klein 332). However, according to Nishitani's ontology, this gap between self and other is non-existent, as all beings are present in the homeground of the self, just as the self is present in the homeground of all beings. For Nishitani, it is a fact that on the field of emptiness, true self-centeredness "only comes about with other-centeredness, and other-centeredness at one with self-centeredness" (Nishitani 264). It is only on the field of *śūnyatā* that the realization of circuminsessional interpenetration manifests itself as compassion. Klein writes: "compassion, grounded in the field of emptiness, need never leave it to engage

with beings, who are themselves grounded there" (Klein 333). Thus, understanding what Nishitani means by circuminsessional interpenetration is the first step to understanding the ethical implications of a "standpoint on which one sees oneself in others and loves one's neighbour as oneself" (Nishitani 279). As Klein argues, this standpoint is the basis for an "ethical imperative to treat others' concerns as tenderly as our own" (Klein 333). However, Nishitani's concept is more radical than Klein's. For Nishitani it is not that we treat others concerns as tenderly as our own, but rather that we treat other's concerns *as* our own because they are our own already. Whereas one could conceivably understand that all things are dependently originated and yet act in selfish ways harmful to the world-nexus, circuminsessional interpenetration is *realized* on the homeground of the self, where one finds not only *nisvabhāva*, but every 'other' as one's 'self.' The self is the self on its homeground because it is not a self, but is a *thing* to all others (Nishitani 275). A major reason that compassion (慈悲, *jihi*), the basis for Buddhist ethical activity, is so difficult to cultivate is that the distance between self and other seems so great. The ethics that can be derived from Nishitani is more radical than golden rule ethics because it eradicates this divide and, therefore, is a leaping off point for compassionate engagement in the world.

Circuminsessional interpenetration and Nishitani's conception of human life are thoroughly interpenetrated, though I chose to discuss the former first in order to relate the interconnected world-nexus to ethics. Next, I will expound Nishitani's understanding of the interrelationship between karma, what he refers to as "being-at-doing", *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana and *śūnyatā*. I will argue that

human beings, according to Nishitani, are originally ethical in the same way that they are originally enlightened.

To begin, karma (業, *gō*) is a basic Buddhist moral notion, one that reveals the endless cycles of birth and death as suffering. According to the 12 conditions of *pratītyasamutpāda*, human life is characterized by ignorance (*avidyā*) and volitional action (*saṃskṛta)*. In the theory of karma, one's very existence (有 being) is an action (為 doing). One's very existence is a karmic result and the cause of more karma. And any intentional action one takes to escape karma merely causes more karma and it is often the case that many Buddhists conceive of this taking place in innumerable lives. Nishitani, on the other hand, argues that karma should not be understood as a theory about the transmigration of human beings through different lives in linear sequence, gaining a better or worse rebirth based upon actions in the present lifetime.

That Buddhists understand time to be a cyclical infinity with a recurrent character has led scholars to posit that cyclical time is a "meaningless endlessness" (Nishitani 218). However, for Nishitani, time is not cyclical, but circular and rectilinear at the same time. It is circular, he argues, because time is not an "endlessly recurring system in which the same world process returns again and again in Eternal Recurrence" as some Buddhists believe, but rather "all its time systems are [a] simultaneous…continuum of individual "nows" (Nishitani 219). Furthermore, as there is an infinite openness at the ground of time, every "now" is something entirely new and therefore not mere repetition. In the sense that there is no repetition, time cannot be described as meaningless endlessness,

but rather as something truly impermanent because all things come into being and pass away in every moment.

That everything is new at each moment has the positive significance of constant creativity and creation, and seems to allow for infinite possibilities. However, endless possibilities present a burden to human beings who feel pushed constantly by the need to *do* things. Nishitani states: "this obligation to unceasing newness makes our existence an infinite burden to us. It means, too, that time itself comes to appear as infinitely burdensome" (Nishitani 220). He refers to our infinite burden as our inexhaustible debt and that the character of human life is one where we must work volitionally, and constantly, to pay off the karmic debt that our existence in time carries with it. This he calls *saṃskṛta*, "being-at-doing" (有為, *ui*) (Nishitani 220). The term karma, for Nishitani, is representative of the fact that as we work to pay off an infinite debt, the work involved in removing one debt becomes the seed of another in a continual cycle. Karma as transmigration, therefore, should not be understood to happen between lifetimes, but in every moment of human existence qua being-at-doing.

Furthermore, he argues that the idea of karma reveals an infinite drive (無限衝動, *mugen shōdō*) existing at the ground of human life, and moreover that human beings can become aware of this infinite drive, though they often ignore it due to ignorance (Nishitani 237).[34] No matter how hard we work, we suffer because settling a debt is equivalent to creating another debt. Because we come

[34] Nishitani argues that in contrast to the standpoint of secularism, wherein individuals are not aware of the infinite drive, the standpoint of karma "implies this self-awareness. Time without beginning or end and infinite drive are characteristic elements of karma from the very outset" (Nishitani 237).

into being and pass away in every moment, the nihility at the base of our being is revealed in every cycle of paying off/restating debt – we feel the worthlessness of working endlessly but also our being *is* the drive to work (Nishitani 239).

The suffering inherent in our nature as beings-at-doing also derives from our inability to recognize that all things are circuminsessionally interpenetrated. Due to our bottomless ignorance resulting from attachment, we do not recognize the fruitlessness of self-centered acting in a dependently originated world. It is self-centered, intentional action, which perpetuates the cycle of continually paying off debts. However, we do recognize and deny due to ignorance that our suffering is derived from the nihility at the ground of our being-at-doing. No amount of intentional action can rid us of the presence of nihility. Thus, we feel our activities are groundless even as we relentlessly pursue our aims. From the standpoint of karma, human beings are only human insofar as they are doing something, willing something.

The field of karma and the field of nihility are bound up together for Nishitani. He describes our "ordinary abode" as "the field of karma and nihility" (Nishitani 263). On the field of karma, humans ceaselessly work to pay off a debt that is constantly recreating itself. Nishitani writes: "In order to *be*, we are obliged to *be relating* to something. This means that our being is a debt unto itself, and that our doing as a settlement of that debt is equivalent to the direct instatement of a new debt" (Nishitani 256). The field of nihility, for Nishitani, is where one recognizes the nihility at the base of this incessant becoming; "our being is passing away and coming to be at every fleeting instant and that therein the

nihility that is constantly nullifying our being is revealed" (Nishitani 256). However, due to our ignorance, we are able to see the nihility at the ground of karma, but we do not free ourselves. Indeed, we cannot free ourselves from self-centeredness. Thus, we constantly move back from the standpoint of nihility to the standpoint of karma. Nishitani writes: "that is what karma means. Dasein in the dynamic nexus of being-doing-becoming is but the being of the self being constituted directly beneath the present as an emergence from nihility into the nature of *avidyā*" (Nishitani 257). The breaking through of our ordinary abode in the field of karma and nihility involves a breaking through the field where self and other are discriminated from one another.

The cycle of karma with its ground of nihility, then, is necessarily bound up with *śūnyatā*. For Nishitani, the standpoint of karma must be "left behind" in order to reach the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, what he refers to as: "a disengagement that signals a conversion from the standpoint of nihility to the standpoint of *śūnyatā*" (Nishitani 250). We can again see that Nishitani's three fields correspond to the three stages on the Mahāyāna path; the field of karma is *saṃsāra*, the field of nihility is Nirvana, and the field of *śūnyatā* is *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana. Thus the movement from the fields of karma and nihility is a movement from the world of duality and non-duality to the non-duality of duality and non-duality. *Saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana is Nishitani's expression for the reciprocity of these two concepts (Nishitani 303). Rather than human beings transcending their existence in time as being-at-doing, conversion to the standpoint of *śūnyatā* is a

radical reorientation, through emptiness, of the standpoint of karma. Nishitani offers *śūnyatā* as the standpoint of the non-ego (Nishitani 251).

Here it is important to note that non-ego does not mean the absence of self. He is very careful, taking a *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana approach, to say that non-ego *is* the self. This position is not a mere negation of selfhood, but a revelation of the fact that "the self is the self because it is not the self" (Nishitani 251). Human being is still understood from this standpoint to be a doing, coming into being and passing away at each moment, but a fundamental reorientation occurs. Work is no longer understood to be an endless burden and reinstatement of a debt because, from the standpoint of the true self that is not self, the ignorance that fueled activity from the standpoint of karma no longer exists. Therefore, the work that is done does not arise from karma on the field of nihility and therefore does not continually create suffering (Nishitani 252).

Nishitani argues that from the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, being-at-doing takes on the character of play. This does not mean that we have severed our karmic bonds, or that our action is autotelic, an end in itself. Work, as play, for Nishitani, is more radical than that: "both working and playing become manifest fundamentally and at bottom as sheer, elemental doing. This is what Buddhism calls playful *samādhi* (三昧, *sammai*)" (Nishitani 253). Playful *samādhi* means that activity takes on the characteristic of non-doing (無為, *mui*) or "taking things as they come" (Nishitani 253). Doing as non-doing is free, spontaneous activity, or what Victor Hori refers to as the performance of activities "without indulging in subject-object duality" (Hori, 2000, 292). This type of activity is the

undistracted, spontaneous activity of *kenshō-ing* ones daily activities. This is similar to our earlier discussion of the eye. The doing of non-doing is the same as the eye seeing because it has non-seeing at the root of seeing. It is likely that Nishitani developed this idea of play from the concept of *wu wei (*無為*)*, non-intentional action. *Saṃskṛta*, being-doing, which just creates more karma is called *u wei* 有為; action which does not because it is non-intentional, is called *wu wei* 無為. Because the action lacks intention, it does not create karma.

However, play is serious for Nishitani. Our existence remains a being-at-doing on the field of *śūnyatā*. We are still working, and because it is in our nature to be beings-at-doing so long as we live "the point is never reached where there is no longer anything to be borne" (Nishitani 254). However, because play on the field of emptiness is a fundamental non-doing, we do not reinstate a debt and pay it off continually on the field of *śūnyatā*: "the doing that brings the debt to life is, in that very act, *not* giving it life" (Nishitani 254). Nishitani argues not that there is no burden to be borne, just that bearing this burden is not the re-creation of burdening debt, but that "shouldering the burden takes on a sense of play, and the standpoint appears from which we go forward bearing the burden spontaneously and of our own free will" (Nishitani 254). This spontaneous activity arises from the self that is a self by being no-self, or self on the field of emptiness that finds its homeground in all things and vice versa.

However, this spontaneity is not a kind of loose impulsiveness and unrestrained activity. The spontaneity Nishitani refers to is the spontaneous shouldering of a *burden*. This is what he calls "earnest" spontaneity (Nishitani

255). On the field of emptiness, "the debt then comes to signify responsibility truly taken on by the self. The debt as one's apportioned *lot* then becomes one's own *task* in the sense of a self-imposed duty or vocation" (Nishitani 255). I will later argue that this is the vocation of the Bodhisattva – one who, in a state of "dharmic naturalness" (自然法爾, *jinenhōni*), works to save all sentient beings from suffering. Nishitani discusses this activity in terms of shouldering a debt without debt that is "a debt to one's 'neighbour' and to every 'other'" (Nishitani 259).

Here it is important to again note that from the standpoint of *śūnyatā* "doing still comes about within the world-nexus through being related with other things" (Nishitani 257). However, realization of circuminsessional interpenetration on the field of *śūnyatā* means that "doing" on this field is not the activity of a self, who arbitrarily wills his actions and who acts out of ignorance, but rather it is activity of the "original self," the self that is a self by being a no-self connected to all things (Nishitani 257). This 'self' relates to the world in terms of *sive*/non (即非, *sokuhi*); it is its 'self' on a field where everything in the world-nexus is also on its own homeground. But this is a dynamic nexus, not a static unity of all things. That a 'self' on this field is one with the world-nexus in the manner of *sive*/non means that this 'self' gives all things their existence, and is given its existence by all things (Nishitani 258). Human work is no longer felt as a burden on this field because one's karmic debt is transformed into a debt without debt. Nishitani writes:

> It is thus a debt coming at the point of release from self-centeredness and the infinite drive that accompanies it. It is a debt to one's 'neighbour' and to every

> 'other.' For our Dasein – involving all our being, all our behavior, all our becoming – to be embraced as a task and a mission is for that very Dasein to appear as something shouldering a debt to its neighbour and all other things. (Nishitani 259)

It is a debt without debt in the same way that on the field of *śūnyatā*, the self is truly itself by being no-self, and fire is fire because it does not burn itself. What Nishitani is speaking of here is the fundamental ground of the human being, the very *koto*[35] of human existence. Nishitani has repeated throughout Religion and Nothingness statements like "a bird flies like a bird and is truly like a bird." The term 'is like' in this statement can simply indicate that a bird flies and thus 'resembles' or 'is similar to' a bird. However, Victor Hori has indicated that 'is like' is a translation of the Japanese 如, which can be read two ways. Its *kun-yomi* is 如く *(gotoku)* meaning "similar" or "like." Its *on-yomi*, however is 如 *(nyo),* which means "thus*"* and is a word with deep Buddhist connotations. Using its *on-yomi* reading then, this statement means something like: "a bird flies and (thus) is a bird" (Hori, June 2008). This statement makes no ontological commitment to an essential bird. Flying is what makes a bird a bird.

Nishitani applies similar logic to the human being on the field of emptiness. He writes that on one's homeground, one's being is such that one makes the debt to all others one's being. A human being who acts in an other-centered manner does so "as something that is at bottom (originally) the sort of thing that does just that" (Nishitani 259). Just as a bird flies and is truly a bird, so

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[35] *Koto* has two simultaneous meanings. The first is "fact," and is used in this way: the fact that a bird flies is what makes it a bird. *Koto* also simply means "word" (Nishitani 190, Hori, March 2007).

too a human being shoulders a debt without debt and is truly a human. Thus, Nishitani writes that on this field:

> 'as it is' and 'as it ought to be' are one and the same; the nature of the task of the *ought* is the other-directedness of the *is*. If this being exists, then, in a constant doing (which is here a doing as non-doing); and if, further, on the field of emptiness doing becomes manifest ecstatically as a true doing; then it follows that in us the doing in its elemental and original form comes to be as something that is directed toward all others and makes every other its master. (Nishitani 260)

However, as this other-centeredness occurs within circuminsessional interpenetration, being a servant to all things only comes about when one is simultaneously also master of all things. Nishitani refers to this mastery as the true self-centeredness of the human being (Nishitani 260). Therefore, it is one's constant responsibility to return to the homeground to constantly actualize one's true existence. This ultimately manifests in such a way that the very act of being other-centered one is also self-centered, meaning in practical terms that one's non-differentiating love "consists of all others, each and every one without exception, being loved 'as oneself'" (Nishitani 278).

Thus, the conversion on the homeground of individual karmic debt to a debt without debt to all other beings signifies that *true* human life has a fundamentally ethical character. In fact, it becomes clear that the one who shoulders the debt without debt is the Bodhisattva (菩薩, *bosatsu*), and, in turn, being a Bodhisattva is *truly* being human. It is in this manner that Nishitani builds the Bodhisattva ideal into his ontology by revealing that one's original self is other-centered.

This idea of ethics differs fundamentally from any concept of ethics in the Western world. Most often religious normative ethics is a kind of Golden Rule

ethics, whereas Nishitani's transcends even this kind of ethics. Common positive expressions in Golden Rule ethics are the Christian expression, found in Matthew 7:12: "do unto others what you would have them do unto you" (Green 743) or the Confucian reversal of the same statement found in Analects 15:23 "do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Lau 136). All similar positive Golden Rules are self-centered; they begin with self-love and then that same love is spread outward to include all others. Similarly, most negative Golden Rule expressions, such as the Christian expression "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Matthew 5:38), are also self-centered – if you hurt me, I will hurt you. In all Golden Rule ethics self and other remain two at all points, no matter how pure the love for others. There is no sense of their non-duality. Nishitani's ethics transcends this position, and presents a new kind of ethics wherein the self is other-centered *by nature* and therefore being good is the very definition of being human.

The next chapter will address Nishitani's Bodhisattva ontology in detail and argue that his understanding of the bodhisattva ideal is not only compatible with the creation of a Mahāyāna ethics, but is the very foundation upon which a positive social ethic can be built. This current chapter has sought to introduce Nishitani and also reveal how his philosophy addresses many of the common critiques of Mahāyāna soteriology and ontology. We have seen that he does not conceptualize Nirvana as an escape from this world and from worldly concerns, but rather as *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana. The ethical consequence of perceiving this goal of practice as not beyond worldly concerns is that worldly concerns are then

able to be conceived as part of practice, rather than a hindrance to practice. Indeed, as he does not conceptualize enlightenment as a state of utter non-duality that is beyond good and evil but rather as a practice of losing attachment to one's individual self, an ethicist is given a ground from which to argue that Mahāyāna is not a world-denying tradition, but a tradition with a different conception of ethical agency. The ethical "agent" of the Mahāyāna tradition, the Bodhisattva, shall be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Bodhisattva Ethics

3.1. Introduction to Nishitani's Bodhisattva Ethics

In the final chapter of Religion and Nothingness, Nishitani Keiji not only provides a philosophical reworking of a number of Mahāyāna Buddhist concepts that have traditionally presented problems for ethicists, but he provides a theoretical foundation from which thinkers can begin to articulate a "Mahāyāna ethics."

Though Nishitani does not discuss "Mahāyāna ethics" in so many words, he builds the Bodhisattva ideal into his ontology. Despite the difficulty of discussing the Bodhisattva in the language of ethical agency, as the Bodhisattva is not properly a "self" and therefore not properly an "agent," Nishitani's presentation of human existence on the field of *śūnyatā* is an appropriate ground for ethics because he does not misinterpret the Bodhisattva as existing purely in non-duality.

Nishitani recognizes that the field of *śūnyatā*, or *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana, is a field of circuminsessional interpenetration – non-duality and duality are neither identical nor different. The Bodhisattva, on the one hand, is beyond attachment to dichotomies such as self and other. This non-discriminating view of the world makes possible true compassion. At the same time, the Bodhisattva's world is not undifferentiated unity, but also difference. On the field of *śūnyatā*, the Bodhisattva remains a thinking being, but one without a fixed subjectivity. From this standpoint one can still make practical, ethical decisions, without having

those decisions stem from ignorance and attachment. One can make these distinctions without succumbing to the falsehood that they are based upon unchanging essences. Thus, Nishitani's Bodhisattva-ontology can be used to address the common critique that *śūnyatā* destroys ethical action by literally emptying it of meaning. On the contrary, while things are ontologically identical on their homeground, there is also distinction, and therefore the Bodhisattva is not "beyond" making pragmatic, ethical decisions. The manner in which the Bodhisattva does so, however, is different from the way a being in *saṃsāra* does.

This chapter will first describe the place of the Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. It will then show how Nishitani's conception of Bodhisattvahood as one's 'original' self is applicable to a "Mahāyāna ethics."

3.2. The Bodhisattva Ideal

a) The Bodhisattva Ideal in Indian Mahāyāna

The Bodhisattva ideal is often used to describe the characteristic differences between early Buddhism and Mahāyāna. Har Dayal notes the differences between the soteriological aim of the early Buddhist Arhat and the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva. The Arhat (from the Pali, *arahā,* which means an enlightened disciple) was a follower of the Buddha who performed ascetic practices in order to achieve Nirvana. Of the Arhat, Dayal writes: "An Arhat who was thus liberated, knew that he would not be reborn. He had accomplished what was to be done. He attained undefiled and final emancipation of mind and heart"

(Dayal 2). Dayal writes that early Buddhist monks were accused of being self-centered, caring "only for their own liberation" and as such he argues that the Bodhisattva ideal developed as a protest against the aloofness of the Arhat (Dayal 3-4). Unlike the Arhat who believes he is not reborn upon entering Nirvana, a Bodhisattva strives to gain *bodhi* (enlightenment) and voluntarily returns to this world in order to save all sentient beings. The Sanskrit term "Bodhisattva", as mentioned above, is understood to mean "one who has *bodhi* or perfect wisdom as his essence [*sattva*]" (Dayal 5).

Gadjin Nagao writes that it is important that the Bodhisattva willingly chooses to be reborn into the *saṃsāric* world; the term *saṃintya-bhavopapatti* means "to take birth volitionally in the world of existence" (Nagao 68). The Bodhisattva volunteers to be reborn solely for the purpose of helping others, and this is done from his unlimited compassion. Though the Bodhisattva enters the *saṃsāric* world, he is not defiled by it. This idea is encapsulated in the term *apratiṣṭhita-Nirvana*, which has the twofold meaning of "not dwelling in *saṃsāra*" and "not dwelling in Nirvana'" (Nagao 71). Not dwelling in *saṃsāra* indicates that the Bodhisattva is not contaminated by the defilements of the *saṃsāric* world due to his wisdom (*prajñā*), and not dwelling in Nirvana implies that the world of *saṃsāra* is accepted as "a joyful garden" and the Bodhisattva's activity of saving sentient beings is carried out joyfully (Nagao 71).

We can see that the Bodhisattva ideal has two aspects, the aspect of ascent and that of descent, and that from an ultimate perspective they are actually not two. Buddhist practices such as following the precepts are carried out for the

purpose of achieving enlightenment, or ascending the ten *bhūmis* to Bodhisattvahood. The "ascending" aspect of the Bodhisattva ideal involves negating the *saṃsāric* world, or realizing nothing exists inherently. The "descending" aspect means that one affirms *saṃsāra* in the light of *śūnyatā*. Nagao writes: "this is to say, in Mahāyāna, more emphasis is put on the real world of *saṃsāra* rather than on the ideal world of Nirvana" (Nagao 72). However, the terms "ascent" and "descent" are not opposites in Nagao's description. Rather, in the final analysis, they are the same (Nagao 73).

The Bodhisattva ideal is often understood in two ways that are not contradictory. One understands a Bodhisattva to be both a being on the way to Buddhahood and a celestial being (like Avalokiteśvara). Nagao refers to an example from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sutra*:

> Buddha Śākyamuni himself, who achieved enlightenment after a long period of practice (ascending activity), declares that he had already achieved it in countless aeons past, and as a skillful means (*upāya*) appears here on this earth (descending activity) for the purpose of benefiting others in the guise of a human being.

Despite the two aspects of the ideal being not two from the ultimate perspective, from a conventional standpoint a Bodhisattva must practice the six or ten perfections (*pāramitās*) and ascend the ten *bhūmis*. Har Dayal translated the ten chief *pāramitās* as: giving, morality, patience, energy, rapt musing [one-pointed concentration], wisdom, skillful means, aspiration, power and knowledge (Dayal 168). Arguably, the most important *pāramitā* is that of giving (*dāna*). Besides wealth and material goods, a Bodhisattva is described by Dayal as one who is ready to sacrifice his limbs for the good of others. The author of the *Bodhisattva- bhūmi* writes that a Bodhisattva must sacrifice his body by becoming

a servant to all sentient beings (Dayal 175). The sacrifice involved in the perfection of giving is done with no selfish motives, and is inspired by the Bodhisattva's compassion (*karuṇā*). The Bodhisattva will become a servant to all other beings because "he loves all creatures more than he loves himself" (Dayal 178).

A Bodhisattva's *bhūmis* have been explained philosophically as having two stages; the bodhisattva first realizes the equality of self and other (*par-ātma-samatā*) and that realization results in the practice of substituting one's self for others (Sanskrit, *par-ātma-parivartana*, Japanese, 身代わり , *migawari*) (Dayal 179). Though there are many parables of self-sacrificing men who feed themselves to hungry tigers or give their eyes to blind men, the spirit of this teaching is that when there is no difference between self and other, the Bodhisattva feels the joys and sorrows of others like his own and is willing to give himself for the sake of others (Dayal 179). Nishitani Keiji draws upon this *migawari* element of the Bodhisattva ideal, along with the idea of original enlightenment (to be discussed below), in his philosophical interpretation of the Bodhisattva ideal.

In addition to practicing the perfections, a Bodhisattva's career has a number of stages (*bhūmis*).[36] Often described as ten stages, the *bhūmis* describe

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[36] Early Indian texts state that there were four stages on the Bodhisattva path, and later texts suggested seven stages. Martine Batchelor writes that ten stages were eventually accepted by most Buddhist schools, though there are still some disagreements about the names and descriptions of each stage (Batchelor 12). One of the best known is the Dasabhumika Sutra within the *Avataṃsaka* Sutra. It outlines 50 stages of bodhisattvahood and 2 stages of enlightenment. The 53rd stage is Buddhahood. In the same *Avataṃsaka* Sutra there is another smaller sutra called the *Gandhavyuha*, the story of the pilgrimage of the youth Sudhana who visits 53 teachers. This is a parable for the 53

the bodhisattva at the beginning of practice as trying hard to cultivate compassion and renounce *saṃsāra*, and as he ascends from *bhūmi* to *bhūmi* he acquires a thorough knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha, and develops his spiritual capacity such that by the eighth *bhūmi* he can read the thoughts of all creatures and by the tenth *bhūmi* becomes a Buddha. It is in the account of the *bhūmi* that one can clearly see the celestial and earthly elements of the Bodhisattva ideal combine (Dayal 274-277).

b) Buddha-nature and the East Asian Bodhisattva Ideal

Yün-hua Jan divides Chinese Bodhisattva literature into three categories; stories of the Buddha's past lives, works dealing with the Bodhisattva ideal as a spiritual goal achieved by following the precepts, and literature on the worship of celestial Bodhisattvas and the compassionate activity of those celestial beings (Jan 126-127). The most popular Bodhisattva literature in East Asia is the latter, and many festivals and rites for worshipping celestial Bodhisattvas have been established in China, Japan and Korea. It can generally be said that the transcendent aspect of the Bodhisattva ideal has the most religious significance in East Asia (Jan 139).

Living persons were also understood to be Bodhisattvas in East Asian Buddhism according to Lewis R. Lancaster. Hagiographic accounts as early as the 6th century C.E. describe Buddhist missionaries and teachers as living

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stages of bodhisattva practice. The *Avataṃsaka* Sutra has been translated by Cleary and Cleary as the *Flower Garland Sutra*.

Bodhisattvas. Additionally, in the T'ang dynasty it became possible for both laity and monks in China to take Bodhisattva vows and precepts and, therefore, be officially recognized as being on the Bodhisattva path (Lancaster 156-158). In Japan, the founders of both the Rinzai and Sōtō sects of Zen Buddhism, Eisai and Dōgen, emphasized the importance of strict observance of the precepts and devotion to meditation as essential to the Bodhisattva ideal. However, this following of the precepts is not exactly the same as following the ten *bhūmis* to become a Bodhisattva is in Indian Mahāyāna.

Though the idea that a person could possess Buddha-nature did exist in Indian Buddhism, in China and Japan this idea was expanded into the ideal of original enlightenment. Inagaki writes that the idea of original enlightenment caused the Bodhisattva ideal to undergo a huge change in Japanese Buddhism. The term "*hongaku*" (originally enlightened, 本覚) is contrasted with "*shikaku*" (becoming enlightened, 初覚) (Inagaki 178). Whereas one following the *shikaku* ideal would understand the Bodhisattva ideal in terms of ascending stages of enlightenment through diligent practice, the *hongaku* theory starts with the ideal that, in practice, one is already a Buddha, and Bodhisattva practices are part of one's being. Thus Dōgen's famous saying "practice is enlightenment" (Inagaki 182). This means that from the *hongaku* point of view, Buddhahood is not a goal in the future, but the reality of the present moment of practice. Inagaki writes: "when mere sitting is practiced on the plane of ultimate Enlightenment, the sitting practitioner is himself an acting Buddha. He now dwells in the Buddha's Self-Enjoyment *Samādhi* (自受用三昧、*jijuyū-zammai*), from which all Bodhisattva

practices emanate" (Inagaki 183). It is this *hongaku* element of the East Asian Bodhisattva ideal that Nishitani Keiji draws upon for his own philosophical interpretation of the Bodhisattva ideal at the conclusion of *Religion and Nothingness*.

3.3. Nishitani Keiji's Bodhisattva Ethics

a) The Bodhisattva as one's 'original' self

I have hinted in Chapter Two that for Nishitani the task-like vocation of a human being on the field of *śūnyatā* is the vocation of the Bodhisattva, saving all sentient beings. I have argued that for Nishitani, a human being who shoulders a debt without debt acts in an other-centered manner because a human being, on the homeground, is the kind of being who does just that in a circuminsessionally interpenetrated world-nexus (Nishitani 259). In other words, I have begun to reveal that a human being, at bottom, is a Bodhisattva, according to Nishitani.

The first step to fully comprehending Nishitani's description of a human being as originally a Bodhisattva is to understand the role of karmic debt. However, it is not entirely clear what conversion of karmic debt to a debt without debt on the homeground means in Religion and Nothingness in relation to the traditional activity of a Bodhisattva. Ideally, Nishitani would succinctly answer

the question: if karmic debt cannot be erased,[37] what happens to it on the homeground? It would be ideal if Nishitani would argue that karmic debt is transformed into an *upāya* (方便, *hōben*); that it is only because there is a self-centered ego that on the field of consciousness, karmic debt is felt as burdensome. When there is no self-centered ego, karmic relations, "debts," would be opportunities for a Bodhisattva to act compassionately. However, his discussion of the conversion of karmic debt to a "debt without debt" requires detailed exegesis.

The true debt is not debt from the standpoint of karma, which is experienced as a burden. Nishitani writes that on the field of *śūnyatā* "it is a debt that we assume of our own choosing in true spontaneity on the standpoint of elemental play, a debt that is constituted in the *samādhi* that emerges into its nature from out of non-ego and its accompanying no-mind" (Nishitani 259). Just as self is converted to no-self on the homeground (which is the self that is truly the self by being no-self), burdensome karmic debt, i.e. human existence, becomes a debt without debt (which is debt that is truly debt by being a debt without debt) (Nishitani 259).

Nishitani writes that from the standpoint of a debt without debt one's activity is earnest effort that is not artificial in any way. He writes; "earnestness means nothing other than the *sein* of Dasein" (Nishitani 259). What he means is that the earnestness of ordinary human activity before a conversion is merely

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[37] In Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, it is understood that karmic debt cannot be erased. For an excellent discussion of the statement "Nirvana and the repayment of karmic debt have one nature, not two" see Yūhō Yokoi, Zen Master Dōgen: An Introduction with Selected Writings, pp. 148-149.

"time-killing divertissement" because even if a dualistic mind is concentrated fully on its occupation it is still "essentially distracted or 'scattered'" (Nishitani 259). Human doing from the homeground, however, is activity from the standpoint of non-ego (無我, *muga*) and non-doing (無為, *mui*). Thus far this sounds very similar to the selfless activity of a Bodhisattva. However, Nishitani writes:

> this standpoint lies on the yonder side of the fundamental self-centeredness of *avidyā*, a field where the infinite drive called 'covetousness' is cast off and *karmic debt has been paid off*. It is for that reason that the debt of Dasein that emerges into its nature on the field of emptiness is a debt without debt. It is thus a debt coming at the point of release from self-centeredness and the infinite drive that accompanies it. It is a debt to one's neighbour and every other. (Nishitani 259, *italics added*)

The idea that one's karmic debt is "paid off" on the homeground rather than transforming into an *upāya* runs counter to one common conception of the Bodhisattva. In both Zen and Pure Land Buddhist teachings, infinite karmic debt is never cleared off, but karmic debt is converted into *upāya* and the karmic sinner gets converted into a great Bodhisattva. In discussions with Victor Hori he has suggested that in all previous lives, the Bodhisattva sinned and sinned again in order to pile up a karmic debt owed to all sentient beings. He did this so that he would be karmically related to all sentient beings and thus have the *upāya* to save them all (Hori, March 2007). Nishitani's statement that a human being on his homeground has reached the yonder shore and thus paid off his karmic debt can be seen as problematic when applied to the Bodhisattva.

However, a closer look at the above quotation can reveal it to be more ambiguous than at first glance. In the sentence after Nishitani writes that karmic

debt has been "paid off" he refers to the "debt of Dasein that emerges into its nature on the field of emptiness." What does this mean exactly? It seems fruitful to interpret Nishitani's statements about karmic debt by using his three fields. Ordinary karmic debt exists on the field of consciousness, and this debt is totally erased on the field of nihility. Debt without debt, the true standpoint, is on the field of emptiness. In a sense, karmic debt is like the string of a kite. It keeps the kite tethered to the earth, and yet if the string is cut the kite falls to the ground. The tension of the kite string keeps the kite taut against the wind and causes it to fly. Karmic debt determines you (if you have a self) and yet is the agent of your freedom (if your self is no-self). I believe it is possible to apply this interpretation of karmic debt to Nishitani's conversion of karmic debt to a debt without debt. The very same karmic conditions that keep us in bondage are also the tools of awakened liberation. I believe this *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana approach to interpreting debt without debt is quite useful, as Nishitani's own description of this particular conversion is left ambiguous.[38]

It remains unclear in Religion and Nothingness if debt without debt is karmic debt converted into an *upāya*. However, this fact does not problematize Nishitani's overall Bodhisattva ontology. The same phrasing is used to describe the conversion of the self on the homeground and the conversion of debt. Nishitani writes that the self is the self by being no-self on the homeground, and debt without debt is described in the same terms. A self-centered conception of one's karmic existence (i.e. one's Dasein) becomes an other-centered conception

[38] However, I must acknowledge that it is also equally as possible to argue that karmic debt is indeed burned off, and that Nishitani's position is counter to a more traditional Zen and Pure Land understanding of karmic debt.

on the homeground. Because each and every person is indebted to everyone else for so many things in the past, it becomes a pleasure to return the debt and do things for other people. Nishitani reveals that the human being is "constituted as something that makes the debt toward all others its own essence" (Nishitani 259). Moreover, it is not simply that one shoulders a debt without debt because one's mind has changed through a conversion experience. Nishitani's Bodhisattva ontology is more radical than that. One shoulders a debt without debt on the homeground because human beings are "at bottom (originally) the sort of thing that does just that" (Nishitani 259). The very character of our being is a task-like existence that is essentially other-directed and other-centered (Nishitani 259). Descartes Bodhisattva would have said "I am indebted, therefore I am." Or, to be even clearer, "I am indebted" *soku ze* "I am." To be, for Nishitani, is to *be indebted*.

It is appropriate to break for a moment to explain the significance of this ontological position. The question a scholar of ethics might ask Nishitani is "what principle grounds or guides our ethical decisions?" Though it would be wrong to utilize the language of "principal ground" as though Nishitani's philosophy contained a kind of existing "Good" of Greek philosophy or Kant's Categorical Imperative, it is possible, at least for now to assert that the self on the homeground, the self whose very existence is other-centered and who makes distinctions without attachment is that "ground" the scholar of ethics is searching for. Again, this is difficult to assert because I am not speaking of a virtue ethics, and that "ground" is not a tangible "something." However, it is fruitful to keep

this in mind as we continue into a discussion of circuminsessional interpenetration and the Bodhisattva.

We have established that the very character of our being on the homeground is other-directed and other-centered. It is important to further explain "debt without debt." Because we live in a circuminsessionally interpenetrated world-nexus, the task of Dasein's shouldering a debt without debt can be expressed in two ways. The first is that in shouldering this true debt "Dasein makes all things its master, follows all things, and gives to all things their being" (Nishitani 259). This is the mode of being wherein the *is* and the *ought* are the same; "the nature of the task of the *ought* is the other-directedness of the *is*" (Nishitani 260). In this sense, human activity on the field of *śūnyatā* (doing of non-doing) is activity directed toward all others and by one who is a servant of all things. However, as within circuminsessional interpenetration a being is simultaneously both master and servant to all things, the corollary position applies: in shouldering a debt without debt, a human being gathers all things into his homeground and is the master or absolute center of all things. This is what Nishitani refers to as true self-centeredness, wherein the self that is truly a self by being no-self "keeps a collective hold (*dhāranī* [總持, *sōji*]) on all things in their dharma-like natures" (Nishitani 260). Thus, Bodhisattva-being is both a self-centered and other-centered way of being, however, the term "self-centered" takes on the non-conventional meaning of the self-centeredness of non-ego.

Again, Nishitani is not creating a kind of virtue ethics with instructions for how to be a "true" self-centered individual. Virtue ethics requires an ethical agent

and the true self-centeredness that Nishitani describes remains clearly a 'no-self'. Bret Davis argues in an essay about Ueda Shizuteru that the process of transcending and re-entering the conventional world is where the ethical implications of this kind of teaching lie. Davis writes: "decision making is performed from the empathetic perspective of the ecstatically engaged non-ego" (Davis 245). For Nishitani, the homeground is not a static resting point for being, but rather a dynamic field, where the process of being on the homeground (of being both master and servant to all things) itself is a source of goodness.[39] It is from this dynamic state that compassion and ethical judgments can be made in the moment. When one reads Religion and Nothingness one must pay as much attention to the *way* Nishitani says these actions are carried out as *by* "whom" (or not-whom) these actions are carried out. It is the process and the action that is important for Nishitani, not the actor per se, and thus his ethics is not a virtue ethics. I realize that seen from the field of consciousness, Nishitani's ethics could look like a virtue ethics where a moral agent is struggling to be a better person. However, seen from the field of emptiness, it is not a virtue ethics because the moral agent has been dissolved.

A human being in the form of his original self, which is the Bodhisattva, is described by Nishitani as "the standpoint of the man who has returned to the

[39] I have drawn on Bret Davis's idea that in Ueda Shizuteru's non-mysticism "all specific evaluative distinctions need to be repeatedly deconstructed and critically reevaluated by way of both transcending and returning to the conventional world of good and evil, [and if you do so] what is implied is that maintaining this dynamic process itself is a root source of goodness, while inhibiting it is a root source of badness" (Davis 245). That Ueda Shizuteru often draws upon Nishitani's ideas in his writing makes this parallel all the more compelling.

homeground of self-being by transforming the world process into spontaneous play" (Nishitani 258). Even on the homeground man never loses his drive to constantly be doing something, though this burden undergoes a conversion and is no longer exhaustive, but rather is taken on as play.

Activity as play is a common way in Zen discourse of describing Bodhisattva activity. Reikichi Kita and Kiichi Nagaya write in their article "Altruism in Zen": "when the utilitarian ideas of advantage and disadvantage have been transcended [in Nishitani's terms, when one rests on one's homeground], every activity naturally accords with the law (dharma) and there is what is known as *yugezammai*, the *samādhi* in which all activity is play" (Kita and Nagaya 66). Bodhisattvas are known to carry out their difficult and infinite task of saving all sentient beings without artificial effort, as if they were at play. Play, or effortless activity, is a common image in Zen Buddhist literature, as seen in Case 89 of the *Blue Cliff Record*: "How does the Bodhisattva of Compassion use her thousand hands and thousand eyes? It's like her hand reaching out for the pillow in the middle of the night" (Cleary 561). As moral beings, a Bodhisattva's "morality does not culminate in strenuous effort, morality culminates in play" (Kita and Nagaya 67).

This playful Bodhisattva activity is what Nishitani means when he writes that for a human being on his homeground "shouldering the burden takes on a sense of play, and the standpoint appears from which we go forward bearing the burden spontaneously and of our own free will" (Nishitani 254). Activity as

earnest play on the homeground is one of the major ways Nishitani works the Bodhisattva ideal into his ontology.

One important fact must be made clear at this point, however. Nishitani writes that his idea of original self on the homeground is not meant to be particular to Buddhism (Nishitani 261). Despite this explicit statement to the contrary, I believe there is ample evidence in the final chapter of Religion and Nothingness that true human being is best described as *Bodhisattva*-being, and that activity as play is the practice of Zen (Nishitani 264) which gives the conclusion of this work a decidedly Buddhist tone, one particularly supported by arguments like "if I have frequently had occasion to deal with the standpoints of Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, the fundamental reason is that this original countenance seems to me to appear there more plainly and unmistakably" (Nishitani 261).

It seems clear that Nishitani's ontology is particularly Zen Buddhist when he explicitly writes about Bodhisattva activity. Nishitani describes the state of no-self as self as the standpoint where "one takes others across before crossing oneself" (Nishitani 264). He argues that the Bodhisattva Vow to save all sentient beings is acted out on this field as "the play of 'self-joyous samādhi'" (Nishitani 264) and that the "original countenance of…Dasein is perhaps best revealed in the *Four Great Bodhisattva Vows*" (Nishitani 270).[40] In addition, he discusses the

[40] The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows are:

> However innumerable the sentient beings,
> I vow to save them all.
> However inexhaustible the worldly passions,
> I vow to extinguish them all.

limitless task of human being-at-doing as corresponding to the unlimited time implied in the Bodhisattva Vows. Just as the Bodhisattva in *saṃskṛta* – the one who is karmically determined to be free in other-centered activity - was a limitless doing, so too, on the field of *śūnyatā*, the Bodhisattva's vows are made in the face of the same unlimited reality. The shouldering of a debt without debt that is the true nature of the self, he argues, is like the limitless task of the Bodhisattva. Nishitani refers to the vow to save all sentient beings as the other-directed aspect of the task, while the vows to extinguish worldly passions and realize the Way of the Buddha is the self-directed aspect. Both aspects are inseparable for the Bodhisattva in the world of circuminsessional interpenetration (Nishitani 270-271). Nishitani also argues that the Bodhisattva Path is "linked essentially with…Great Compassion, or what is generally termed religious Love" (Nishitani 272) and connects the Bodhisattva Path directly with an ethic of compassion that transcends Kant's understanding of human beings as ends in themselves.

For Nishitani, Kant's position that one should always recognize individuals as ends in themselves and never treat them as means for personal gain remains an ethic from the standpoint of the autonomous self. As the world is truly an interconnected world-nexus, Nishitani argues: "morality comes about only through negating and passing beyond such a standpoint" (Nishitani 274). Only from the standpoint where one is both master and servant to all things, wherein one's autonomy is located within a totally reciprocal relationship of self and

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However immeasurable the dharma-gates,
I vow to master them all.
However incomparable the Way of the Buddha,
I vow to attain it. (Nishitani 270)

other, can truly moral behavior manifest (Nishitani 277). Moral behavior is not merely a matter of free will, of choosing a good action over a bad one. Nishitani's ethics is not a virtue ethics. Moral behavior is not properly the behavior of a 'self' but is 'action of non action' or "becoming a *thing* to all other beings" (Nishitani 275). Where Kant argued that persons are ends in themselves, never things, Nishitani believes persons are means, things for other persons. The one who is a thing for all other beings is the Bodhisattva. In this way Nishitani transcends not only Kant's ethics, but also the very way in which Western philosophers understand ethics from the perspective of a self, an ethical agent. In her essay "*Śūnyatā*, Ethics, and Interconnectedness," Elizabeth Gallu notes that for the Bodhisattva "one's actions and reactions toward the world are thus imbued with genuineness and compassion; they are free of self-centeredness and are truly other-regarding, not through rational choice, but via an inherent unifying force of life itself" (Gallu 193). This 'inherent unifying force of life' is circuminsessional interpenetration for Nishitani, as he often refers to this interconnection of the world-nexus as a field of force. In regards to ethical activity in this field of force, it is not a matter of 'choosing' good actions, but a matter of responding compassionately in each moment from the homeground where all things are circuminsessionally interpenetrated. By building this Bodhisattva ideal into his ontology, Nishitani provides a theoretical foundation from which a "Mahāyāna ethics" may be articulated. And this theoretical foundation is by no means similar to a Western understanding of ethics, and we must be wary of trying to force his ideas to fit a particular Western scholarly mode.

b) Bodhisattva activity as religious observance

Though Nishitani clearly provides an ontological ground for the formulation of a "Mahāyāna ethics," it is important to mention that the ethics in Religion and Nothingness is not revealed in explicit practices, nor does Nishitani overtly suggest specific codes of conduct to follow in order to be good. Rather, his purpose is mainly to reveal that our very being-in-this-world is other-centered Bodhisattva-being. Unlike James Heisig, who argues that Nishitani abandons ethics in his post-war writings (Heisig 218), I believe Nishitani's 'retreat' from direct, practical ethics is a 'retreat' to find a ground for ethics. It is only possible to have a genuine ethics when first a ground is opened up beyond self-centeredness, technological thinking, and nihilism.

Before describing the character of Bodhisattva activity in the world, I feel it is important to highlight where I see Nishitani's Bodhisattva ontology and traditional Mahāyāna/Zen moral codes combine in a way that could be a useful beginning for formulating a Mahāyāna ethics. It is my belief that Nishitani presupposes conventional moral codes are to be followed; they can be followed from the standpoint of karma for selfish reasons or from the standpoint of *śūnyatā* where following moral precepts is one's natural state of playful activity, or *wu wei*.

I believe Nishitani means to imply Buddhist precepts are the ones to be followed in this manner, however it is also possible to make the case that all religious moral codes can apply here. It is possible, for example, to follow the Ten Commandments provisionally and for selfish reasons from the usual standpoint of

duality. Then, following conversion to the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, the Ten Commandments are no longer followed provisionally, but followed as one's natural activity. However, as nearly all of Nishitani's references in this section are to Buddhist sources, specifically to Dōgen and other Zen masters, and he has described the world-as-it-is as circuminsessional interpenetration, an idea with specifically Huayan Buddhist roots, I believe it is most suitable to argue that Nishitani's ontology combines best with Zen Buddhist codes of conduct. In addition, because of the Zen tradition's emphasis that everyday activity is Zen practice, Nishitani may have chosen Zen above religions that distinguish the sacred and profane. Traditions that make that distinction may find the everydayness of Bodhisattva practice problematic.

My supposition that Nishitani's bodhisattva-ontology and Zen moral codes can be fruitfully combined is based upon Nishitani's arguments that existence on the field of *śūnyatā* is "religious observance" (行、*gyō*) I believe it is reasonable to posit that existence as religious observance is not only understanding the world-as-it-is (i.e. circuminsessional interpenetration), but is also upholding the Buddhist precepts and acting out of compassion for all sentient beings.

To begin, it is quite clear that for Nishitani the true self that is no-self is equivalent to the manifestation-*sive*-apprehension (現成-即-会得, *genjō-soku-etoku*) of Buddha-mind (Nishitani 260). He writes:

> To practice or 'observe' the Way of the Buddha is nothing other than the Dasein of the self on the field of emptiness. Here 'doing' takes on the character of religious observance. Here *being* oneself is no different from *becoming* oneself or from *making* a self of oneself. For the vocational, task-like character of our Dasein to be the shouldering of a debt without debt means that existence as such is religious observance. (Nishitani 261)

As the last sentence above indicates, *saṃskṛta*, or karmically caused being-at-doing, itself is religious observance for Nishitani. What characterizes existence as religious observance? Again, though Nishitani emphasizes that his references to practicing Zen and observing the Way of the Buddha are not meant to show Mahāyāna Buddhism as the only path, he does say that the original countenance of human being appears in Buddhism "most plainly and unmistakably" (Nishitani 261). His account of existence as religious observance is followed by references to great Buddhist teachers like Dōgen, Rinzai, Shinran, and Jōshū saying that in the statements by these teachers (specifically Rinzai) we see examples of natural compassion. This natural compassion takes the form of revealing to others "the Right Path" where the true self can be reached when the perspective of self/other is transcended (Nishitani 263). Citing Dōgen, Nishitani writes that the true self can be found only when one sits in *zazen* (Nishitani 264). Generally, it is not difficult to see that in terms of "religious observance" Nishitani favours Zen practice when he writes: "Zen practice is, as such, the standpoint of the debt without debt toward all other beings" (Nishitani 264).

It is plausible to assume that a Mahāyāna ethics that utilizes Nishitani's Bodhisattva-ontology would presuppose a reliance on the precepts, as Bodhisattvas are best defined as those who "dedicated themselves to the welfare of others while cultivating the precepts and perfections" (Batchelor 5). Buddhist practice has three main aspects: ethics, meditation, and wisdom.[41] Observing the

[41] This is referred to as the Three Learnings of the Noble Eightfold Path.

precepts fall under the category of ethics (Batchelor 18) and I believe this can be interpreted as the practical dimension of Nishitani's "religious observance."

As I have shown above that true human being is Bodhisattva-being for Nishitani, existence as religious observance implies that the standpoint of debt without debt is also the position of naturally upholding certain moral codes, like the Zen precepts, and thereby acting out of compassion for all sentient beings. Ives writes of the Zen view of precepts that "they are expressions of how a fully awakened person acts naturally and as ethical guidelines supportive of practice" (Ives 38). When one begins Zen practice, one does not immediately experience a conversion to the field of *śūnyatā* and realize circuminsessional interpenetration. Rather, one works at being good by following the precepts from the standpoint of the self. From this standpoint, precepts are followed as a matter of will similar to the actions of Kant's ethical agent. However, on the field of *śūnyatā*, precepts are followed no longer by exertion of will, but rather spontaneously and playfully. Of following the precepts, it has been said that the person who began Zen practice diligently following them, after conversion on the field of *śūnyatā*, "does not imitate the precepts, they imitate him" (Kapleau 231-32, quoted in Davis 241).

In his essay "Who is arguing about the cat? Moral action and enlightenment according to Dōgen," Douglas K. Mikkelson writes of Dōgen's understanding of following precepts:

> they are prescriptive from the standpoint of initial instruction and descriptive from the perspective of enlightenment…so we may say that the more one practices and thus actualizes enlightenment, the more perfect the precepts become in describing the person acting from enlightenment. (Mikkelson 395)

Thus, as the precepts can generally be called 'rules for being good' – especially the Ten Major Precepts, for example refrain from taking life, refrain from taking what is not given, refrain from telling lies, etc. – the fact that the Bodhisattva naturally follows the precepts means the Bodhisattva's spontaneous activity, unlike ordinary selfish action, arises from a ground of goodness (Batchelor 57-59). As Nishitani writes: "the most solemn religious observance undertaken for the benefit of others is such a playful samādhi" (Nishitani 264).

When one combines Nishitani's bodhisattva-ontology and Zen moral codes one is then able to answer some practical questions with relation to Bodhisattva activity. In his essay "The Problem of Ethics in Nishitani's Religion and Nothingness," David Little asks what the consequence of being a Bodhisattva on one's homeground means for practical action, especially action in an interdependent world-nexus. He writes: "in having these deeply altered dispositions, does one act differently? How? In what way? Does one still honor one's commitments? Does one honor them in a different way? How? Does one still refrain from cruelty? How? Why?" (Little 185).

An answer to this question would be that the Bodhisattva does act differently from an ordinary human being when encountering an ethical problem. Many Mahāyāna stories elucidate this kind of compassionate activity. A useful story is the story of Hakuin and the baby. Hakuin, a Buddhist monk, is accused of fathering a child. When accused he says merely "is that so?" and accepts the child. If an ordinary man were accused of fathering a child he would fight to clear his name. Hakuin does not. Instead he takes care of the child. Later, when the real

father of the child is discovered Hakuin merely says “is that so?” and gives the child back (Reps 22). Hakuin, even while knowing the non-duality of good and bad fortune, got involved – showing his realization of the non-duality of duality and non-duality. He cared for the baby. It is useful to contrast this Bodhisattva perspective with the Taoist story of the man who lost his horse, in order to see the difference between a simple perspective of non-duality and Hakuin’s non-duality of duality and non-duality.

In the story of the man who lost his horse, an old man’s horse disappeared and his neighbours felt sorry for him. The old man, however, said: “who knows if this will turn into a blessing?” A few months later the horse returned and his neighbours congratulated him on his good fortune. But the old man merely said: “who knows if this will turn into a disaster?” The old man’s son loved to ride horses. One day he fell off the horse and broke his legs. The neighbours tried to comfort the old man, but again he said: “who knows if this will turn into a blessing?” And indeed it did, for the neighbouring state invaded, and all the strong young men from the area had to go to war. Nine of ten ended up being killed. The son, because he was crippled, stayed at home (Langer 99-100).

In this story, the old man shows he understands the non-duality of good and bad fortune, but there is no evidence of his *migawari*, no evidence that he further understands the non-duality of duality and non-duality. Compare this again with Hakuin, whose wisdom was deeper. He cared for the baby. There was self-commitment, Hakuin’s self was not a self-centered self; his was the self of no-self, of the Bodhisattva. The playful way the story of Hakuin and the baby is

told is an expression of Nishitani's playful *samādhi*. Bodhisattva ethics is not the deep brooding and heart-breaking sort, but is casual, playful, and unintentional. The Bodhisattva's response to the situation arises not from personal prejudice, but from the homeground of all things, taking into consideration "each moment as a unique set of circumstances" (Gallu 196). A Bodhisattva's response arises from the *realization* of circuminsessional interpenetration, and as such would also be a response of compassion. That self-centeredness is other-centeredness on the field of *śūnyatā* is the reason one refrains from cruelty. One is not cruel to others because on one's homeground, one's own existence is the existence of all others. Furthermore, the spontaneous play of the Bodhisattva is the natural following of the Buddhist precepts and, thus, a Bodhisattva would refrain from evil and do good thereby honouring his/her commitment to the Buddhist path.

Though I believe the above does answer David Little's specific concerns, this practical answer does not address a major problem in Bodhisattva-ethics. If the 'good' activity of a Bodhisattva is activity that saves sentient beings from suffering, is this activity, on the conventional level, always moral? Mahāyāna abounds with stories of Bodhisattvas offering their bodies and limbs to those in need and, in the Zen tradition in particular, enlightened teachers beat their students with sticks, chop off their fingers, and cut cats in half in order to lead their students to enlightenment. I will briefly suggest that there is a difference between Bodhisattva hagiographies, Bodhisattvas understood as objects of faith, and the prescriptive dimension of the Bodhisattva ideal.

First, the great stories of offering up limbs to starving tigers are intended as teachings about compassion, but also as teachings about the problem of perceiving the world in terms of duality. They function as *kōans*, in a sense. By searching daily for the meaning of a story and by repeating it to oneself, one can realize the truth of the story – and the truth of offering one's limbs to tigers is not that one must do so in order to be good, but that being good is a matter of being selfless in a circuminsessionally interpenetrated world-nexus. Secondly, many statements in Mahāyāna, and especially Zen, texts are not relative truths but tales to make a teaching point and are not to be taken as injunctions to break the precepts. As Carter argues: "to take them literally is not the point" (Carter 103). Thirdly, Dōgen's view of enlightened individuals who commit crimes, such as Nan-Chuan's killing the cat, is useful to investigate. Mikkelson writes: "In Dōgen's view, a rigorous adherence to the precepts is descriptive of the moral character of the advanced Zen practitioner. Thus, any breaking of the precepts usually suggests a lesser spiritual attainment…" (Mikkelson 396). As Nishitani has shown that human being on the homeground is other-centered, immoral activity is necessarily activity *not* from the homeground. I believe it is not unfounded to assert that the field of *śūnyatā*, *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana, is a field of compassion. A Bodhisattva's being-at-doing, unlike activity from the standpoint of karma, combines both wisdom and compassion at every moment.

c) Bodhisattva-ontology, *Śūnyatā* and Ethics

I have argued that the final chapter of Religion and Nothingness provides a theoretical ground in the Bodhisattva for what could be called "Mahāyāna ethics." I have suggested one way in which this ethic could be understood in practical, worldly terms: Bodhisattva activity is a state of natural, playful following the Buddhist precepts. I have not yet made explicit, however, the way in which Nishitani's presentation of *śūnyatā*, of *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana, overcomes one of the major challenges to positing Mahāyāna ethics: misinterpretations of *śūnyatā*.

The attainment of Nirvana, or the realization of *śūnyatā*, has often been misunderstood as the goal or end of Mahāyāna Buddhist action. This way of understanding Nirvana and *śūnyatā* leads to an abandoning of the world of *saṃsāra*, in favour of Nirvana, as though the two were not interconnected. What need does one have for codes of conduct, one might ask, if distinctions between good and bad are ultimately to be left behind? This way of caricaturing enlightenment has led to assertions that "Zen is thoroughly iconoclastic and haphazardly spontaneous, rooted in an exhaustive negation that leaves nothing positive" (Ives 41).

However, what Nishitani's presentation of *śūnyatā* reveals is not Nirvana as a future goal, but *saṃsāra-sive*-Nirvana as reality. Similar to Nishitani, Masao Abe writes: "*śūnyatā* or Nirvana should not be understood as a goal or end to be attained in Buddhist life, but as the ground or the point of departure from which Buddhist life and activity can properly begin" (quoted in Palmer 128). Nishitani does not have an explicit practical ethic in Religion and Nothingness because he

presents the field of *śūnyatā* as the point of departure from which *truly* ethical action can arise.

Saṃsāra-sive-Nirvana overcomes the fallacy of positing Nirvana as an end, and shows that the world of *saṃsāra* cannot be abandoned or neglected in pursuit of future enlightenment. Furthermore, upon revealing the fallacy of presuming Nirvana to be the soteriological aim of Mahāyāna, one can see that the true aim of the tradition is saving all sentient beings. Nishitani's focus on human being-at-doing in the now as Bodhisattva activity necessarily entails involvement in the world of *saṃsāra* and working to save beings trapped there. This involvement in the world is shown by Nishitani to be human being's proper *vocation*. When one views the world from one's homeground, one is therefore able to act within it in transfigured ways. Existing at one's homeground allows for true compassion, compassion as love of one's neighbour, to be cultivated.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to suggest criteria by which human being-at-doing as Bodhisattva-activity can address specific ethical problems. The goal of this paper was to reveal that Nishitani Keiji's Mahāyāna philosophy as expounded in Religion and Nothingness provides the philosophical tools necessary to posit a Mahāyāna ethics. Critics of Zen and Mahāyāna in general have argued that there is no ground in *śūnyatā* on which to judge one type of action as more valuable than another. I have suggested that the field of circuminsessional interpenetration is a field of compassion where the seeming gap between self and other is bridged. I have shown that Nishitani rightly portrays *śūnyatā* as a field where duality and non-duality are neither identical nor different.

In understanding that difference co-penetrates unity in the world-nexus, Nishitani opens a space for practical, ethical decisions, without those decisions arising from ignorance and attachment. Furthermore, by revealing that the true self is other-centered, Nishitani makes it our responsibility as human beings to reach that homeground. We may conceptually understand how to be good, but he calls for us to actualize that knowledge and advocates Zen practice as the way to do so.

Conclusion: Nishitani and current Mahāyāna Buddhist scholarship

Western writings about ethics are most often based around a principle for making ethical decisions, be that "the Good" in Plato, the Categorical Imperative in Kant or "the greatest good for the greatest number" in Utilitarianism. After reading this paper, it is very likely that a Western ethical scholar still wants to ask: "how does being a Bodhisattva help you make an ethical decision?"

There are a couple of ways to address this question, one being to refer that scholar to the closest thing to a "principle" in Nishitani's philosophy "the self on the homeground" and say that it is from there that ethical decisions are made, though if the scholar then asks "how" the answer "playfully" is not likely to satisfy. Western scholars of ethics are not looking for *kōans* or to be told to sit *zazen* in order to realize a truth, but rather they seek clearly outlined principles for action.

I would like to turn to an insightful paragraph about this subject by Bret Davis. He writes:

> the zealous moralist who does not pass through this radical experience of letting go would remain driven by the poisons of desirous attachment to whatever has been posited as categorically good, hate of whatever has been posited as categorically bad, and delusion with respect to the impossibility of categorically reifying reality into discrete entities on whose essences fundamentalistic ethical judgments can be passed. (Davis 241)

It is useful to apply this passage applies to Nishitani and to the Western scholarly problem.

What kind of desire motivates Western scholars to find a principle for making ethical decisions? Certainly an academic desire, and also the compulsive need to make distinctions, set things distinctly apart from one another so judgment can be clearly and easily passed. However, trying to apply this kind of logic to Nishitani's ethics reveals a fundamental problem that Nishitani himself addresses in Religion and Nothingness.

Nishitani begins Religion and Nothingness by posing the question "what is religion?" He does not come up with a satisfactory answer because this question cannot break through the standpoint of the self. Thus, he moves on to a different standpoint. He converts the question "what is religion?" to "what am I to religion?" Instead of taking the standpoint of the self and looking at religion, he takes the standpoint of religion and looks at the self.

Is it possible to do the same thing with ethics? What is revealed when one asks the question "what am I to ethics?" rather than "what is ethics?" Simply, what is revealed is that asking the ethical question from the standpoint of self is the locus of the problem. A similar problem exists when asking the question, "so how do Bodhisattva's make decisions?" More than likely, the questioner is trying to make the agent the subject of the ethical question. But if the question is turned around, "what am I to ethics?", then suddenly the self is the entire target of ethical doubt.

Nishitani does not offer, nor is it his project to offer, a series of guidelines for how to act on the homeground and therefore what actions from that place are good or bad. What is important to remember is that a being on the homeground can make distinctions, and hence ethical judgments because the homeground in Nishitani is not static Nirvana. The major difference between actions from the homeground and my own actions are that that a being on the homeground can act without attachment and without reifying anything in the process – goodness, badness, self, other, being – and I cannot. Therefore my motives for acting are always self-centered even when I intend for them to be other-centered. It is only through the realization of the homeground that one's selfish actions are truly converted to good, bodhisattva-like activity.

Again, the Western scholar is screaming "HOW?" And the Zen teacher quietly laughs. Far away a child throws a stone in a river that runs to the ocean. And I cannot complete my final sentence but to urge, as carefully as an "I" can, for scholars and students of Buddhism to turn their questions back on themselves, and try to realize, in the sense of know and make-real, "what am I to ethics?"

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