INVERSE CORRELATION: COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY IN AN UPSIDE DOWN WORLD

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Abstract. Kitarō Nishida introduces the concept of "inverse correlation" (Jp. *gyakutaiō* 逆対応) in his final work, *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview,* which he uses to illuminate the relation between finite and infinite, human and divine/buddha, such that the greater the realization of human limitation and finitude, the greater that of the limitless, infinite divine or buddhahood. This essay explores the applicability of the logic and rhetoric of inverse correlation in the cases of the early Daoist Zhuangzi, medieval Japanese Buddhist Shinran, and modern Protestant Christian Kierkegaard, as well as broader ramifications for contemporary philosophy of religion.

There lies deep within my heart and mind, a source of tranquil repose beyond the reach of the waves of grief or joy.

Kitarō Nishida, from his *Journals*

"[Father] Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth – with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence."

Dr. Rieux in Albert Camus, *The Plague*

I. INTRODUCTION

In his final work, *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview* (*Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekai kan* 場所的論理と宗教的世界観),

the Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida invokes the concept of 'inverse correlation' (Jpn. *gyakutaiō* 逆対応) to express his understanding of the nature of the self. According to Nishida, the greater the self's realization of its own finite nature, the greater the positive realization of the infinite; the greater the self-realization of limited human particularity, the greater the self-realization of the limitless divine universal:

> From a human perspective, the human-divine relationship is effectively encapsulated in the statement by Zen master Daitō, "Separated by aeons yet not apart for even an instant; facing each other all day long yet never encountering each other for even an instant." It captures the contradictory self-identity of the divine-human relation. This is the world of the absolutely contradictory self-identity [of opposites], of negation-as-affirmation, [and affirmation-as-negation]. It must be this world of inverse [mutual] determination, of *inverse correlation*. Thus our religious mind and heart arise not from the [human] self but [in response] to the call of God or of Buddha. This is the working of the Divine or of the Buddha, arising from the Source of the self (Nishida 1989: 340; *italics* mine).

This statement represents the culmination of Nishida's philosophy, the result of a lifetime of work, and his synthesis of Asian and Western thought, in particular Buddhism and Continental Philosophy. Nishida's thought at the end of his career differs greatly from its origins as enunciated in his maiden work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究) (Nishida 1992), which focuses on 'pure experience' (*junsui keiken* 純粋経験) as the basis for his philosophical anthropology. Nevertheless, there is continuity in the trajectory of Nishida's thought.

Nishida considered 'pure experience' the basis for individual subjectivity, not the other way around. 'Pure experience' was more like an unbounded field that gave rise to individual particularity, and served as the precursor to the 'place of absolute nothingness' (*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所), none other than the 'place' articulated in *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview.* In between *An Inquiry into the Good* and *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview,* Nishida went on to explore a wide range of themes including self-awareness (*jikaku* 自覚), active intuition (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観), the absolutely contradictory self-identity [of opposites] (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾的自己同一), and the historical world (*rekishiteki sekai* 歴史的世界).

For the purposes of the present essay, there are two key aspects that stand out. First is the focus on individual subjectivity that begins with *An Inquiry into the Good*. Second is the developing concern for the social and historical world that culminates in *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview*. The former represents the existentialist thread that runs through Nishida's thought, and his insistence that the individual come to grips with her own concrete existence in the here-and-now. The latter represents an increasingly Hegelian strain that defines the significance of the self as inseparable from the unfurling of history.

From his philosophical writings to his more informal essays and journal entries, it is evident that Nishida considered it essential that he himself embody to the best of his ability the philosophy he put down on paper, and that his philosophy be an expression of his lived existence. He was a serious practitioner of Zen Buddhism, and he repeatedly took himself to task for what he perceived to be his insufficient practice and ethical behavior (Yusa 2002). He also agonized over the tumultuous situation in Japan as the Second World War came to a close, and he completed *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview* in May 1945, just two months before his death, and just four months before the end of the war. As a leading intellectual holding an influential position as Professor of Philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University (present-day Kyoto University), he also felt responsible for articulating his, and Japan's place within the larger historical order. Nishida was the putative founder of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, made up of a number of his colleagues and students who drew upon his thought and that of the colleague who succeeded him, Hajime Tanabe. Nishida, along with other members of the Kyoto School, came under intense criticism before, during, and after the war for pronouncements that were regarded as supportive of and in line with Japanese militarism.

The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview is as much Nishida's existential attempt to come to grips with the utter negation of self in the face of brutal historical circumstances as it was his philosophical project of expressing the self logically, as the synthesis of perceived opposites: life and death, East and West, Asian Buddhism and Continental Philosophy, individual existence and world history. At the heart of this project of attempting to resolve contradictory opposites was his concept of inverse correlation: the more dire the state of the self, the greater the potential for realization of the infinite.

Nishida's articulation of inverse correlation is instructive on several counts. First, it assists in elucidating a recurring pattern of logic in religious discourse where finite and infinite are correlated as polar opposites. Second, it brings into relief the rhetorical function of this type of discourse, in unmasking false consciousness. Third, it brings into relief the problem of taking a religious moment, which in its original context was designed to subvert the dominant narrative, but which is now used to form the core of a new master narrative. Examining these three aspects of Nishida's 'inverse correlation' will both show how Nishida's thought has broader philosophical relevance beyond the particular bounds of his Buddhist-Continental synthesis as well as further illuminate the thorny problem of Nishida's wartime ideological complicity with Japanese militarism.

In order to present these points, this essay begins with an explanation of the broader meaning of inverse correlation. Then, the concept of inverse correlation is applied to three articulations of religious thought: Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) definition of the religious paradox of Christian faith consciousness, Zhuangzi's (ca. 4th century BCE) description of the Daoist adept who lives in the Dao, or the Way, and Shinran's (1173-1262) expression of the Pure Land Buddhist path of the foolish being (Jpn. *bonbu* 凡夫) embraced by boundless compassion (*mugai no daihi* 無蓋の大悲, *muen no ji* 無縁の慈).[1] Finally, Nishida's concept of inverse correlation is revisited in light of its broader applicability to our contemporary world. While there are major differences among the philosophical anthropologies of these thinkers as well as their larger worldviews, and some of these will be noted, the present focus remains more on the similarities of their applications of inverse correlation in their religious and philosophical logic, their rhetorical effects, and the ramifications of invoking their subversive transformations.

[1] Many are familiar with the fact that some of the early introduction of Nishida's work's to the West presented it as a philosophical articulation of Zen Buddhist experience. As Robert Wargo notes, however, such a characterization of Nishida tends to distort the significance of his work as a philosopher (Wargo 2005: 5). Furthermore, as Christian theology and Shin Buddhist thought are arguably more influential in Nishida's formulation of the concept of "inverse correlation" than Zen, they provide more apt resources for comparison as is done here. There are plentiful resources available for those who wish to explore the relation between Zen and Nishida's philosophy (Yusa 2002).

II. INVERSE CORRELATION AS ACTUAL AND RHETORICAL

Generally speaking, people tend to look for positive correlations, for example, increased pay for higher performance at work, higher reward for more effort, greater appreciation for larger self-sacrifice. In certain arenas, however, there is an inverse correlation. For example, in economics, where a novice might expect a rise in interest rates with an increase in bond prices, the reverse is true; there is an inverse correlation between the price of bonds and interest rate yields: the higher the bond price, the lower the interest rate yielded; the lower the price, the greater the interest rate yield. The reason for this is simple; when the interest rate yield on newly issued bonds rises, the price on similar, previously issued bonds must drop to match the effective interest rate yield in order to be saleable. When the interest rate drops on newly issued bonds, then the price on previously issued bonds with similar par value (maturity value) can rise to take advantage of the interest rate differential between the new bonds (lower rate) and the existing bonds (higher rate).

The point of the example is this: What initially seems obvious to the novice eye turns out to be false, based on an assumption of positive correlation. What to a novice seems counter-intuitive turns out to be true, once one digs beneath surface expectations and carries out an actual analysis, revealing the *inverse correlation*. There are examples of inverse correlation in the realms of philosophical and religious thought, rhetorically playing off of the element of overturned expectations. For example, in the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus states, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven .... Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (KJV: Matthew 5:3-5). This statement enunciates a correlation that is the inverse of the usual expectation: Those who are spiritually well endowed are closer to realizing the realm of the Divine, and those who proactively seek God's Kingdom will inherit it.

There are two ways to understand this kind of inverse correlation. First is in terms of actual inverse relations: finite and infinite, temporal and eternal. The greater the realization of finitude, the greater is the realization of infinitude; the greater the awareness of the ephemeral, the greater the awareness of timelessness. Second is in terms of rhetorical subversion: unmasking the false consciousness of assumed positive correlation through the rhetorical use of inverse correlation. Where a person assumes he is spiritually well endowed, Jesus unmasks his pretentions by stating the opposite. It is possible to interpret the statement

by Jesus cited above in both ways. On the one hand, the more that a person realizes her finite capacity (poor, meek), the more she opens to the infinite scope of the divine (heaven, earth). On the other hand, this is a statement made by Jesus to his followers in order to unmask their false consciousness (assumption of spiritual wealth).

That is, Jesus seeks to expose the conscious presumption of his audience, their assumption that they *are* spiritual, that they *are* the presumptive heirs to the earthly realm as the manifestation of spirit. In this case, the problem he identifies is the gap between the self-conscious identification of his audience with spiritual wealth versus their actual state of spiritual poverty. One of the traditional interpretations describes this in terms of pride; according to Augustine's exegesis on the "Sermon," "Pride is the beginning of all sin." Yet, in framing Jesus' pronouncement merely in terms of pride, one might easily overlook the rhetorical sophistication of the inverse correlation in this statement, designed to expose the gap between consciousness and fact, or between conscious assumption and actual state of being (even though the analysis of this gap is implicit in the concept of "pride").

Furthermore, one can argue that the rhetorical effectiveness of this statement rests upon three levels of signification: individual, social, and universal. The focus of Matthew 5:3-5 is on the social or communal, insofar as Jesus is speaking directly to his community of followers, warning/admonishing them for their spiritual pride. Yet, the full scope of this statement cannot be understood without taking into the account the individual and universal implications of his statement.

For example, if a particular individual is listening to Jesus's statement and only hears its communal significance, then he may fail to understand that it is meant directly for him. He may fail to take full responsibility for recognizing the overweening pride that prevents him from receiving the holy spirit into his heart. If he only hears the social, communal significance of the message, then he may think, "We as a community must do better," but he may not realize that he must reflect and act upon his own spiritual lack.

Similarly, an individual may be receptive to hearing the social significance of Jesus's statement for his immediate community but fail to understand its potential significance at the universal level, that is, for all people in history. In that case, she may fail to reflect sufficiently on her own deep sense of responsibility and think it sufficient to work out problems on a local level. The universal level of significance assumes that

at some level, each person is answerable to all humanity, and perhaps even beyond, to all beings. Christianity, insofar as it takes the form of a so-called "world religion," implies that Christians take seriously this universal dimension.

The concept of inverse correlation discloses a possible tension in the historical unfolding of any religious movement. On the one hand, statements of the kind cited above, as attributed to Jesus, enunciate the inverse relationality of finite and infinite. On the other, they demonstrate the necessity of exposing false consciousness. If only the former, the inverse relationality, were operational, then no effort would be required to realize the divine, since the idea that the meek "shall inherit the earth" would merely be a statement of fact. However, if a change in consciousness is required, from false to true, as well as a corresponding change in behavior, then a great deal of effort is required.

In the Biblical story of Jesus, one can see inverse correlations conveyed as matters of both fact and of rhetorical subversion. Jesus as the Son God, or the finite incarnation of the infinite, is presented as actual, an existential reality. Such statements as Matthew 5:3-5 cited above may be interpreted as operating at the levels of both actual fact and rhetorical subversion. Rhetorical subversion, unlike bare facts, necessarily operates socially, as language and discourse. Jesus was a highly subversive figure, and his rhetoric frequently functioned in such a way as to subvert the narrative of the dominant religious and political order.

Problems arise in the operation of inverse correlation when its rhetorically subversive function is overlooked or misapplied. For example, when in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, Lloyd Blankfein, Chief Executive of Goldman Sachs, stood in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and declared that as a banker he was "doing God's work," he immediately became the object of derision and ridicule (Bryan 2009). Here, in the sacred precincts of Christianity, where the discourse of inverse correlation had become tradition, Blankfein had now unexpectedly come out with a declaration of positive correlation, where he equated wealth and self-enrichment of the wealthy with the work of the Divine, a statement all the more galling for those who held Blankfein and other heads of major financial institutions at least partially responsible for the impoverishment of tens of millions of ordinary people around the world while he and a few others profited to the tune of billions.

As religious institutions develop and become large financial and political entities themselves, they face similar criticisms. Although they

are supposed to be doing "God's work," they often come to be seen as enhancing their own wealth and power rather than humbling themselves in service to and in inverse correlation with the greater glory of the Infinite.

III. SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND CHRISTIAN FAITH AS INVERSE CORRELATION

One of the seminal figures to make this point in the modern West was Søren Kierkegaard, who advocated for the meaningful religious existence of individual human beings over and against a corporatized view of religion in which individuals were only considered religious within the larger sweep of history, as members of religious institutions and communities that were deemed to be the primary carriers of historical significance. Kierkegaard criticized the latter as mere "Christendom," a world in which simply being born into a Christian family carried the assumption of faith:

> That we are all Christians is something so generally known and assumed that it needs no proof but may even be about to work its way up from being a historical truth to becoming an axiom, one of the eternal intuitive principles with which the babe is now born, so that with Christianity there may be said to have come about a change in man, that in "Christendom" a babe is born with ... the principle that we are all Christians (Kierkegaard 1968a: 107).

In contrast with this Kierkegaard emphasized the existential struggle to live a life of true faith:

> In the passionate moment of [faith]-decision, ... it seems as if the infinite decision were thereby realized. But in the same moment the existing individual finds himself in the temporal order, and the subjective "how" [of faith-decision] is transformed into a striving, a striving which receives its impulse from the decisive passion of the infinite, but which is nevertheless a striving [on the part of the believer] (Kierkegaard 1968b: 71).

Kierkegaard is well-known for his criticism of a certain kind of popular Hegelianism that was in vogue in Europe during his lifetime.[2] Kierkegaard

[2] For the purposes of the present essay, Kierkegaard's criticisms are better understood as directed toward a stereotyped view of Hegel rather than a full analysis of Hegel's

railed against what he regarded as the System of Christianity in which individuals were treated as mere cogs in the turning wheels of a much larger historical unfolding in which Divine Spirit supposedly revealed itself. He was equally critical of those who considered themselves Christians just because they were part of "Christian" culture: merely attending church, recognized for their civic contributions as part of a "Christian" life of virtue and so forth, what he polemically called "disgusting hypocritical priestly fudge" (Kierkegaard 1968a: 126). Rather than "being" Christian, Kierkegaard emphasized the task of "becoming" Christian; rather than a commodified "thing," a difficult path of faith: "But the eternal is not a thing which can be had regardless of the way in which it is acquired; no, the eternal is not really a thing, but is the way in which it is acquired."

Thus Kierkegaard introduces an inverse correlation between outer Christendom and inward striving, such that the emphasis on the appearance of being Christian has according to him come at the expense of truly becoming Christian, that the striving to attain faith has been sacrificed in the name of "Christendom." This inverse correlation, expressed socio-historically in relation to Kierkegaard's immediate circumstances, discloses its broader, more universalistic significance in relation to his philosophical anthropology, as articulated in *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard 1980). In this work, written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard gives a psychologically nuanced analysis of, first, despair, and then, sin-consciousness. For him, sin is the willful expression of despair, and yet, as it shall become evident, this dark condition of willful despair holds the key to realizing true selfhood.

The basis of this analysis is Kierkegaard's view of the self as a *self-relating synthesis in a state of constant becoming:* "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself ... A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, ... of freedom and necessity .... A synthesis is a relation between two .... In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity" (Kierkegaard 1980: 15).

This passage, which opens *The Sickness Unto Death*, has been the subject of much discussion. For our purposes, the key lies in the self as *synthetic relation*. First, there are two aspects to the self, of finitude and infinitude, necessity and freedom. The finite aspect is the self that

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thought proper. Jon Stewart provides a helpful examination of Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel Reconsidered (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

is bound to this world, that must eat and sleep, that is bound to desire, and that must die. The infinite aspect is the self as the creation or self-expression of the Divine, of infinite potentiality and unlimited freedom. The self, in this view, is neither wholly finite nor wholly infinite but a synthesis of the two. As an analogy, no human being has broken nine seconds in the 100-meter dash, or run a mile under three minutes. Yet, every track and field record has been broken, most in recent history, such that no known limit has ever been reached. Technology has its limits, but no one has discovered the limits of developing medical cures, of computing power, or of increasing automobile fuel efficiency. Ethically, no human being has been morally perfect (with, for many Christians, one notable exception: Jesus Christ), yet no one has found the limits of perfectibility. In Kierkegaard's view, human beings are constantly in the process of relating their limited, finite accomplishments to their infinite potentiality, in the attempt to achieve ever greater heights.

In addition to the self's activity of relating its opposing aspects – finite and infinite, necessity and freedom – is yet another level of relating, constituting the third aspect of the self, which is the *self relating to itself:* "If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self" (Kierkegaard 1980: 15). This self-relating of the self to itself is the self-consciousness of the self as synthesis of finite and infinite, the self relating finite to infinite. Ultimately, this self-relating is not only a matter of consciousness, of self-consciousness, it is also will, in the sense of rendering the synthesis, of finite and infinite. As an analogy, a runner decides that he must increase his initial sprint to achieve a faster time in the 1000-meter run. Such a decision involves both conscious recognition and the will to execute the contents of this recognition.

The problem, for Kierkegaard, is that human beings virtually never execute the act of the *self relating itself to itself* perfectly or completely. The self either overemphasizes the finite aspect or the infinite aspect, thus falling into despair. That is, one either becomes overly bound to the finitude of the self or to the infinitude of the self. For example, if one believes that one must always place the fulfillment of economic needs above all else, then one becomes a drudge, a slave to work, falling into despair over the finite needs of the self. Alternatively, if one dreams up fanciful scheme after scheme, yet is never able to act on any of them, then one becomes lost in imagination, falling into despair over the availability of infinite possibilities and freedom.

Once the self becomes aware of its own imbalance, either favoring the finite aspect or the infinite, it should be able to correct itself. Yet, it either willfully ignores this imbalance, or willfully tries to correct itself in an inappropriate manner. This willfulness deepens the pathology of the self from despair to sin, since the self knowingly goes against itself as a synthesis of finite and infinite. For example, an alcoholic who knows he needs to stop drinking in order to regain his health but knowingly continues drinking commits the sin of willingly binding himself to the finite aspect of the self, ignoring his infinite capacity to renounce drinking. Or, a person who recognizes her alcoholism and forces herself to stop drinking by sheer force of will eventually breaks and returns to drinking because all she can think about is drinking, even if it is the thought of "not drinking"; according to Kierkegaard, this is like the sin of "willing to be oneself."[3]

Consciousness, by its very nature, is more bound up in the finite aspect than the infinite, as it functions primarily in the discursive realm, even as it ranges towards the infinite in imagination. Only when the finite, conscious self understands itself as the self-expression of the infinite can it come into proper relation to the whole of the self as synthesis. Yet, consciousness cannot let go of itself, its own willfulness. Sin-consciousness is the self's own recognition of its inability to let go of its bondage to finite self-consciousness. In genuine sin-consciousness, the gateway to the infinite opens up, such that the self comes into proper relation to the infinite, or the Divine. Thus, sin-consciousness opens the way to faith-consciousness: "Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God, [the Infinite]"(Kierkegaard 1980: 82). The self, abiding in the finite realm, must maintain consciousness; yet, it must recognize its inherent limitation in the face of the infinite. Sin-consciousness is self-consciousness expressed as humility in relation to the infinite; while functioning in the finite, discursive realm, the self relates itself to itself by recognizing its grounding in the Infinite, thus coming to rest "transparently in God."[4]

[3] For this reason, in Alcoholics Anonymous, there is emphasis on the finite self's helplessness to overcome alcoholism, and the need to rely on a "higher power," i.e. infinite aspect of the self, in order to begin on the road to recovery.

[4] Kierkegaard defines this as "religiousness A," faith in God. The ultimate faith for him is "religiousness B," faith in Christ. Since the sinner cannot believe in himself, he must find salvation through the belief that someone other than he has attained the perfect synthesis of finite and infinite. Kierkegaard's Christian view is that this is found in Christ

The inverse correlation in Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology is that the deeper the realization of sin-consciousness, the greater the realization of faith-consciousness, and consequently, the greater the realization of true selfhood. It should come as no surprise that for Kierkegaard, as a Protestant Christian, his philosophical anthropology accords with Jesus' own statement of inverse correlation cited earlier: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven .... Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." Recognition of one's own spiritual impoverishment, i.e. sin-consciousness, becomes the gateway to the realm of the Infinite, the Kingdom of Heaven. The universalistic scope of this philosophical anthropology of the finite-infinite self is evident in the statement, "I ... assume that there awaits me a highest good, an eternal happiness, in the same sense that such a good, [the eternal happiness of faith,] awaits a servant-girl or a professor" (Kierkegaard 1968b: 19). Yet, in this statement, there is also a hint of irony, for the "professor" is often the butt of Kierkegaard's jokes, the conceptual "system-builder" who creates enormous edifices of thought but has only a shack to live in, spiritually speaking: "In relation to their systems most systematisers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack nearby" (Kierkegaard 2003: 98).

As one of the pioneers of Existentialism, Kierkegaard exalted the significance of individual existence over and against historical consciousness. Yet, he did not ignore history. Rather, he railed against the spiritual torpor of his times, in which he implicated the "professors, the system-builders." "They do not live in their own enormous systematic buildings. But spiritually, that is a decisive objection. Spiritually speaking, a man's thought must be the building in which he lives – otherwise everything is topsy-turvy" (Kierkegaard 2003: 98). Thus, Kierkegaard's use of inverse correlation in relation to his historical circumstances was to declare that, as a Christian, he saw his fellow "Christians" as un-Christian; a Christian who was a "Christian" in name only was not a real Christian. In fact, the greater the investment in declaring oneself "Christian," the more diminished one became in the inward process of deepening faith.

In his philosophical works, Kierkegaard employed an elaborate strategy of pseudonymous authorship to depict different spheres or modalities

as the "Son of God," and that faith in Christ inspires the believer to move towards the life of Christ, even as he cannot escape his condition as a sinner.

of existence including varying degrees of religious consciousness. The exception to this was his final work *Attack Upon Christendom,* which he wrote in his own name; he showed his true colors and claimed the ideas of his final oeuvre as his own. As Gregor Malantschuk notes, "With his last writings Kierkegaard wants to be instrumental in destroying the 'phenomenon' Christendom in order to make room for the dawn of the new" emergence of genuine faith (Malantschuk 1971: 371). Just as Matthew 5:3-5, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," carries historical commentary about the larger corruption of society, Kierkegaard's Existentialist inverse correlation returns himself as an individual author to the stage of history through his *Attack Upon Christendom.*

IV. ZHUANGZI AND THE REALIZATION OF THE DAO, THE WAY, AS INVERSE CORRELATION

The early Daoist thinker Zhuangzi, like Kierkegaard, regards the core of religion as a dynamic path, or Way (*Dao*) of cultivation, rather than set of doctrines or system of ideas, and it is in this context that the Daoist Way of inverse correlation becomes evident.

The *Zhuangzi* along with the earlier *Laozi* constitute the foundational texts of early Daoism. Although attributed to its supposedly eponymous author, it is now well established that the *Zhuangzi* was compiled over time and represents the work of many hands over several centuries. Nevertheless, there is also widespread agreement that the seven "Inner Chapters" are consistent enough to be the work of a single individual, and that many of the other twenty-six chapters constitute variations and resonant treatments of themes related to the inner chapters (Roth: 1991). The present discussion includes episodes from these seven chapters but also includes an episode from the other chapters that accords with much of the discussion in the inner chapters.

For Zhuangzi, the Dao, or the Way, carries at least three senses: the way of Nature, the way of human beings, and the way to express the Way. The way of Nature includes the entire cosmos, which Zhuangzi and the early Daoists regard as inherently harmonious. For human beings, the ecological environment untouched by human artifice constitutes the most accessible manifestation of cosmic harmony: the cyclical change of seasons, the flow of water from high to low, the daily cycles of sunrise and sunset, and so on. It is these harmonious patterns that enable human

beings to pursue settled agricultural life, plan for various activities throughout the year, raise families, and live out the natural life cycle of what it means to be human.

Zhuangzi is not opposed to human culture *per se.* Farming is culture, cooking is culture, playing simple musical instruments such as drums can also be culture. For Zhuangzi, however, there is a difference between human culture as a natural expression of Nature, and human culture that has lost touch with, that has fallen out of sync with, its harmonious rhythms. Nowhere is the divide between human culture in harmony with nature versus that out of sync with nature more evident than in the episode of Woodworker Qing.

In this episode, Qing sets out to make a ceremonial bell stand. Zhuangzi's Daoist path to making the most beautiful, suitable bell stand is not to apprentice under a master, or to engage in a long course of study using manuals and techniques. Rather, the Dao requires him to forget and leave behind any thought of human culture and all its trappings, the king and his court for which the bell stand will be used, any recognition for his work, including the remuneration he might receive, even his awareness of himself as a craftsman. Through a cleansing or purifying process involving physically fasting for several days, Qing is said to clarify his mind to such an extent that he can see the working of Nature in sync with the requirement to make a bell stand.

> When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of title or stipends .... And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fall away. After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go. This way, I am simply matching up 'Heaven' [Cosmos/Nature] with 'Heaven' (Watson 2003: 129).

According to Zhuangzi, Woodworker Qing engages in a process of undoing and keeping at bay the pernicious effects of human culture in order to be able to see clearly the rhythms of Nature as it interfaces with the human realm. At that point, however, the act of carving the bell stand is no longer a human activity in the conventional sense of human cultural production. Rather, it is as if Qing has become transparent to the

workings of the Cosmos itself. It is Nature carving itself through the hand of Qing and the tree. The key to Qing carving the bell stand is *un-doing* the interference of cultural artifice to release the self-constellating power of Nature to create the bell stand, to allow It to work through Qing.

This passage gives the impression that the carving of the bell stand is entirely a natural act requiring no human artifice, as if the bell stand was meant to be in the same way that the Sun was meant to rise, and flowers to bloom. Complications arise, however, when considering the use of the bell stand. Zhuangzi's Daoist protagonists, like Qing, tend to be low on or outside the social hierarchy, regarded as an advantage in avoiding the entanglements of power and competition, living simple lives close to nature, and working with their bodies so that they can live in rhythm with the Way. Yet, the bell stand, apparently meant to be in the larger scheme of things, is designed for use in the King's court, the center of elite social and cultural power and discursive entanglements. In this sense, the bell stand becomes indicative of a potential contradiction: How can Woodworker Qing, the Daoist adept, create a bell stand that is emblematic of and reinforces the oppressive structures of human artifice alienated from the flow of the Dao in Nature?

In order to examine this problem, we turn to another episode, this time from the inner chapters, entitled, "Caring for Life."[5] Here, we find Cook Ding, the Daoist butcher, who so skillfully carves an ox that his knife has not required sharpening for nineteen years.

> "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. And now – now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint" (46).

[5] This discussion of the episode of Cook Ding and following comparison with the episode involving King Xuan and the ox from *Mengzi* 1A7 derives from my work with students in REL 407/507 The Bull in the China Shop, a course on comparative animal ethics I taught in 2009. This course was made possible by the generous support of the Coleman-Guitteau Professorship, Oregon Humanities Center, University of Oregon 2009-10. In particular, I am indebted to my collaboration with Eric Tojimbara, currently a doctoral candidate in Asian Languages and Cultures, UCLA.

Here "skill" is associated with contrived human culture, with training acquired solely in the human realm of instruction. Cook Ding "goes beyond skill," letting his spirit guide him in carving the ox. Like Woodworker Qing, Cook Ding has purified himself – mind and body – of discursive entanglements: "Perception and understanding have come to a stop," and he is able to "go along with the natural make up .... So I never touch the smallest ligament." His ox carving is emblematic of Zhuangzi's Daoist approach, flowing with the deep oneness of the Way, not fighting against its grain.

Like Woodworker Qing, Cook Ding is socially working in the service of someone much higher in status. In this case it is Lord Wenhui, who has tasked Ding with butchering the sacrificial ox. A question similar to that involving Qing arises in connection with Ding: Is the butchering of the ox for a high-ranking noble in accord with the Dao? A clue to this question can be found in the title of this chapter, "Caring for Life," the same phrase with which the exchange between Ding and Wenhui is brought to a conclusion: "I [Wenhui] have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!" (47)

What is the meaning of "life" in this phrase, "caring for life"? At first glance, it might be taken to mean the life of Lord Wenhui, since Cook Ding is presumably preparing a meal for him. Yet, this is obviously not the ultimate meaning, as it must refer at a deeper level to the life of the Dao, the Way. In either case, it cannot be the life of the ox which is butchered. To justify the butchering of the ox for the sake the Dao, one must find that killing the ox and eating its meat must be part of the larger pattern of the Dao, just as making the bell stand must be part of the larger cosmic harmony that Woodworker Qing taps into.

There may yet be further dimensions to Cook Ding caring for the life of the Dao in butchering the ox. In order to understand this, one must place the *Zhuangzi* within its larger historical context. The work of early Daoists such as Laozi and Zhuangzi arose partially in response to perceived excesses of the dominant philosophical paradigms of their time, in particular Confucianism. The Confucians emphasized discursive learning, centralized government, and focused their efforts on creating a harmonious social order. Where they emphasized tradition, learning, and doing, the Daoists emphasized nature, unlearning, and undoing. Laozi came after Kongzi (Confucius) whom he criticized (mostly implicitly); Zhuangzi followed the second great Confucian Mengzi (Mencius).

In a well-known passage in the latter's eponymous work, *Mengzi,* there is an exchange between Mengzi and King Xuan who is seeking Mengzi's counsel on how to be a good ruler (1A7). In order to teach King Xuan, Mengzi recalls a conversation he overheard concerning King Xuan's decision to substitute a lamb for the sacrificial ox. Mengzi criticizes Xuan for departing from tradition but praises him for taking pity on the ox. King Xuan's compassion showed that he had a good heart, but his failure to follow Confucian ritual protocol, refusing to sacrifice the ox and replacing it with the less valuable lamb, resulted in his subjects criticizing him for being miserly. "The heart behind your action is sufficient to enable you to become a true King. The people all thought that you grudged the expense, but, for my part, I have no doubt that you were moved by pity for the animal" (Lau 1970: 55). Mengzi goes on to encourage King Xuan to cultivate his heart-mind (*xin* 心) by correcting his mistake and extending his compassion to his subjects. Finally, Mengzi advises Xuan to "stay out of the kitchen" so that his sense of compassion will not be dulled: "The attitude of a [Confucian] gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. This is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen" (Lau 1970: 55). In other words, leave the butchering of the ox to the lowly cook so that the King can cultivate the virtue necessary to care for the life of his subjects.

Against this background, it becomes clear that Zhuangzi created Cook Ding as a subversive figure in relation to the expectations for a person of virtue. There is an *inverse correlation* between Mengzi's guidance to the King regarding care for the life of his subjects, on the one hand, and Zhuangzi's Cook Ding showing Lord Wenhui how to care for life, on the other. Where the usual Confucian expectation is that the King lead by the power (*virtus*) of his compassion, Zhuangzi presents the lowly Cook Ding as the exemplar of the Way. From Zhuangzi's vantage point, the lowly butcher shall inherit the Dao, and the one who seems unvirtuous (lacking compassion) turns out to be most virtuous in the Way. Similarly, in the episode of the bell stand, there is an inverse correlation between the ruler as the expected paragon of virtue and Woodworker Qing as the lowly craftsperson. Qing is of such low status that he is not even the bell-maker, only the maker of its stand. Yet, in attaining the Dao, he has completely forgotten that "the ruler and his court" exist; he has left society behind to become one with the Dao in Nature.

The force of applying the inverse correlation is meant to be both rhetorical and actual. The intrigue in both the episodes of Cook Ding and Woodworker Qing derives from the unexpected rhetorical inversion whereby normally peripheral figures are placed at the center of action, and those of the lowest status are elevated as Daoist exemplars. Yet, Zhuangzi does not present these figures as merely metaphors for the Dao. The devaluing of the ruling intellectual elite, and the valorization of craftspeople working intuitively with their bodies, living simply and close to nature – this is designed to be the actual early Daoist vision of Zhuangzi. In a passage that is all about inversion he states, "There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair [thinning hair], and [the great] Mount Tai is little. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and [the legendary sage] Pengzu died young. Heaven and Earth were born at the same time I was, and the myriad things [of creation] are one with me" (Watson 2003: 38). That is, one must turn expectations upside down to show that, ultimately, everything is one in the Dao beyond words.

We will return again to Zhuangzi below, but to further examine the implications of this type of inverse correlation, we now turn to the Pure Land Buddhist thinker Shinran, founder of Jōdo Shinshū, known as Shin Buddhism in the West.

V. SHINRAN AND THE PURE LAND BUDDHIST WAY AS INVERSE CORRELATION

Shinran was a proponent of an emerging Pure Land Buddhist movement in Medieval Japan that is known today as Shin Buddhism, the largest sect of Japanese Buddhism. Like Zhuangzi, Shinran rejected what he perceived to be the overly intellectualized, ritualized, artificial culture of the establishment, but the object of critique in this case was what Shinran regarded as the aristocratic Buddhism of his day, out of touch with the majority of commoners, rather than the bureaucratic Confucianism addressed by Zhuangzi in early China. Shinran was part of a lay-oriented movement that was persecuted and outlawed by the imperial court and established Buddhist clerics, and he and a number of other priests were exiled into the countryside, far from the imperial palace and center of Buddhism in the environs of the capital of Kyoto. Although Shinran and others were pardoned and allowed to return when the authorities felt that

the momentum of their movement had dissipated, he refused to return to the capital and instead lived among the peasants in the countryside who he felt were more genuine and closer to the true spirit of Buddhism. Like the Daoist craftspeople and farmers depicted by Zhuangzi, what Shinran saw in the peasants were simple folk without pretense living close to the earth, in rhythm with nature, closer to being one with the cosmos than the scholastic monks of the capital whom he saw as corrupt.

Despite the positive characteristics Shinran attributed to them, these farmers and fishermen had their difficulties. Whereas Zhuangzi as a Daoist diagnosed the problem of his time as disharmony with the Dao caused by mental static in the form of too much thinking and wrong-headed thinking, Shinran as a Shin Buddhist saw suffering caused by attachment and blind passion. In the larger view of Buddhism, there is nothing wrong with desire, only desire blinded by attachment to preconceived ideas about what the reality of the self is or should be. This is what in Shin Buddhism is called blind passion (Jpn. *bonnō* 煩悩; Skt. *kleśa*), or desire driven by attachment. Liberation from the bondage of this blind attachment is effected through the realization of emptiness (Jpn. *kū* 空; Skt. *śūnyatā*), understood as the true nature of the self and all reality as devoid or empty of any mental fixations. While emptiness in itself is colorless, odorless, formless due to lacking any conceptually identifiable characteristics, the release into emptiness is experienced as liberation and illumination from the dark abyss of blind passions. Thus, in Shin Buddhism, emptiness is expressed as the awakening of infinite light, or Amida Buddha (Skt. Amitābha Buddha). The awakening of infinite light is also referred to as the realization of great compassion (Jpn. *daijihi* 大慈悲; Skt. *mahā-karuna*) because when one flows with the feeling ("com-passion") of emptiness, one is released from blind passion.

This dynamic between what Shinran calls the "foolish being" (Jpn. *bonbu* 凡夫, Skt. *pṛthagjana*) filled with blind passion and the boundless compassion of Amida Buddha is to be realized in the central practice of Shin Buddhism, the chanting of the Name of Amida Buddha, rendered in Japanese as Namu Amida Butsu. It is one of many forms of contemplative practice found throughout Buddhism and derives from the Sanskrit, *Namō-amitābha-buddha,* which means, roughly, "I, this foolish being, entrust myself to the awakening of infinite light." For Shinran, the repetitive chanting of the Name of Amida Buddha leads to the realization of emptiness, experienced as infinite light and boundless

compassion enveloping the foolish being. Whereas Amida Buddha is the personified expression of emptiness, the Pure Land, the realm of Amida, is the spatial expression, akin to nirvana.

The inverse correlation in Shin Buddhism lies in the dynamic of this practice: the deeper the realization of blind passion, the greater the realization of boundless compassion. According to Shinran, these are not of two different natures as both are equally "empty." He likens them to ice and water. Once the ice of blind passion is embraced by the warmth of boundless compassion, they become as one in the ocean of light (CWS I: 371; Shinran 1969: 429): "The greater the ice [of blind passion]; the greater the water [of boundless compassion]" (CWS I: 371; Shinran 1969: 429). Ultimately, the power of the chanting practice derives not from the limited self-consciousness of the Shin Buddhist practitioner but rather arises from emptiness or boundless compassion itself, as the spontaneous action of reality illuminating, embracing, and dissolving the ego-centered self-consciousness of the foolish being from within her own depths. For this reason, Shinran also refers to emptiness and Amida Buddha as "other power," or the deepest reality of the self that is "other than ego," or other than "self power."

Shinran was a prolific writer who composed most of his works between the ages of seventy-four and ninety. The most well-known work associated with him, however, is the *Tannishō,* a collection of his statements including commentary, a text purportedly compiled posthumously by his follower Yuien. This is the most widely read work of Japanese Buddhism, and within it, the most famous statement occurs in "Section III":

> Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land [realization of the realm of emptiness], how much more so the evil person [who is burdened with the karmic weight of blind passions].
>
> But the people of the world constantly say, even the evil person attains birth, how much more so the good person. Although this appears to be sound at first glance, it goes against the intention of ... other power. The reason is that since the person of self power, being conscious of doing good, lacks the thought of entrusting the self completely to other power, he or she is not the focus of [boundless compassion], ... Amida Buddha. But when self power is overturned and entrusting to other power occurs, the person attains birth in, [or realizes,] the land of True Fulfillment [the Pure Land of emptiness] (Shinran 1969: 676; Unno 1996: 6).

Here, Shinran states the inverse correlation most precisely. The presumption is that a person who performs karmically good actions and purifies himself moves closer to the realization of emptiness and other power free from the entanglements of ego-centered self power. What such a person fails to recognize is the darkness of blind passion and attachment within. Only in the moment of recognizing himself as a foolish being filled with blind passion does he become open to the illumination of emptiness and boundless compassion. Like an alcoholic who sees problems in everyone but himself, the "good person" is the one furthest away from the awakening of infinite light. Yet, just like the alcoholic who recognizes that he is the most foolish one of all, having earlier failed to see his own addiction, and thereby takes the most crucial steps towards recovery, the "evil" one who comes into the awareness of his own blind passion is the one who simultaneously is able to enter into the ocean of light.

However, the foregoing statement by Shinran from the *Tannishō* is not only a universal statement of Shinran's philosophical anthropology but is made by him in the specific socio-historical context of the emerging lay-oriented Shin Buddhist movement. Shinran had become increasingly disenchanted with the pretensions and artificiality of the aristocratic priesthood in and around the capital. For him, the unlettered, simple peasants of the countryside were much closer to the realization of Amida's great compassion, the very people who were considered "evil" and inferior in the eyes of the ruling priesthood for their lack of education and culture. Shinran called his followers "honored friends of the way, fellow practitioners," (Jpn. *ondōbō, ondōgyō* 御同朋御同行), these farmers and fishermen, often illiterate, who came to follow his practice of chanting the Name of Amida Buddha. Among those who counted themselves followers of Shinran's Shin Buddhism, there were also hunters, butchers, and merchants, considered karmically inferior by the establishment priesthood because they made their livelihood off of the death of other creatures, either by killing or selling them, or both. Shinran aligned himself with them, as he states in *Teaching, Practice, True Entrusting, and Realization* (*Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証), "This is the Dharma of attaining buddhahood through immediate transcendence [in the moment of realizing great compassion through saying the Name of Amida], for those of us who are inferior, filled with blind passion, hunters and merchants alike" (Shinran 1969: 121).

On the one hand, Shinran's statement from the *Tannishō,* "How much more so the evil person," carries universal significance insofar as everyone may be regarded as having some degree of attachment and blind passion. On the other, this statement is aimed directly at the aristocratic priesthood, "the good person," in order to unmask its hypocrisy, and at the same time valorizing the lowly peasants, fishermen, and hunters who are made to carry the label of "the evil person," but without whom there is no food for the majority including most in the priesthood who were not vegetarian.

As in the case of Cook Ding from the *Zhuangzi* and Jesus' statement from Matthew 5:3-5 from the *New Testament,* the application of inverse correlation in the above passage from the *Tannishō* is intended to function rhetorically and to provide an actualizable vision. These visions operate both at the universal level of potential applicability to all people everywhere and at the local level of specific socio-historical circumstances. Failing to take into account any of these aspects potentially leads to distortions or misapplication.

VI. INVERSE SELF-CORRELATION AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL: KIERKEGAARD, ZHUANGZI, SHINRAN

Each of the authors examined above articulates an inverse correlation in which the self – variously Christian, Daoist, and Shin Buddhist – has its false consciousness unmasked through an unexpected rhetorical inversion. This is designed to lead to a truer, more genuine self-realization in light of the larger reality of the self, whether it be God the Infinite, the Dao beyond conceptual opposites, or the Shin Buddhist awakening of infinite light. Each articulation, however, takes place within a specific context. First, each author presents a philosophical anthropology or model of selfhood distinctive to his own religious and philosophical perspective. Second, there are diverse historical circumstances: modern Danish Protestant, early Chinese Daoist, and medieval Japanese Shin Buddhist. The authors identify different delusions that they see as plaguing the consciousness of the inhabitants of their historical contexts. Each author deploys a logic of inverse correlation based on a rhetorical strategy specifically designed to unmask the purported false consciousness of his context and to point the way to true consciousness or awareness. Thus the universalistic vision of each thinker is mediated

by the inverse correlation dictated by his socio-historical circumstances. Yet, as indicated in the initial discussion of Matthew 5:3-5, the consideration of inverse correlation in each context remains incomplete unless one addresses the individual level of realization or meaning along with the universal and socio-historical levels.

As it turns out, each of the authors examined here – Christian Existentialist Kierkegaard, Daoist Zhuangzi, and Shin Buddhist Shinran – reflects on his own individual realization. In referring to themselves, they do not necessarily hold themselves up as paragons of faith, self-cultivation, or awakening, respectively. Rather, to varying degrees, they self-reflexively express their failure to live up to their own ideals. Yet, in doing so, do they merely admit to shortcomings, or are they once again invoking varieties of inverse correlation that in fact serve to reinforce the validity of their overall frameworks of religious and philosophical thought?

Kierkegaard. The peculiarities of Kierkegaard's own life story have been amply documented: his engagement to and break up with Regine Olsen; his pretending to be one of the "common folk" by standing on street corners; and his similar attendance at theater productions, but only the beginnings and endings so that he would not waste time better spent on his philosophical reflections and writing. While during his lifetime he received little notoriety beyond his immediate intellectual circle in nineteenth-century Copenhagen, Kierkegaard recognized his own philosophical brilliance and predicted that academics around the world would be making a living off of interpreting his writings! Yet, of his own faithfulness in relation to Christianity he stated, "I have never fought in such a way as to say: I am the true Christian, others are not Christians. No, my contention has been this: I know what Christianity is, my imperfection as a Christian I myself fully recognize – but I know what Christianity is .... My tactics were, by God's aid, to employ every means to make it clear what the requirement of Christianity truly is," that is, what is means to become a true Christian (Kierkegaard 1962: 153-155).

On the one hand, Kierkegaard is merely following through on the logic of his own inverse correlation. Only by confessing his falling short of faith does he actually confirm his faith. On the other, this confession is given in the context of his explanation of his pseudonymous authorship, dislocating himself in relation to the authorship. That is, he rejects any identification of his own religious attainment with that of any of the

pseudonymous authors. There is one exception to this dis-identification; in his journals, he does give an assessment of his own faith in relation to the pseudonyms: "I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus" (Kierkegaard 2003: 175).

Thus, we find Kierkegaard the believing Christian placing himself at a complex intersection of historical existence, pseudonymous authorship, and religious and philosophical thought. First, as a Protestant Christian, he simply makes a statement of his sin- (and faith-) consciousness: "My imperfection as a Christian I myself fully recognize." Second, nevertheless, he sees his own realization as lying between that of Johannes Climacus (John the "Climber") and Anti-Climacus (The Anti-Climber, or "Descender"); that is, he places himself as not yet having attained the highest realization of faith, one that can look down on all others, yet higher than the rather philosophical and ironical Johannes Climacus who describes the intricacies of faith while not yet having fully attained it. Third, as a privileged intellectual who lived off of the inheritance from his father, Kierkegaard is not the common person who he often extols as having greater potential faith than the professional philosopher who creates magnificent conceptual edifices which he cannot inhabit because of his spiritual impoverishment.

While this is not the place to delve fully into the problem of Kierkegaard the man in relation to Kierkegaard the author, the key points for our purposes are as follows: Faith is not blind; faith-consciousness has its own sophistication. Yet, no amount of intellectual gymnastics by itself can yield faith, for it requires a commitment to belief and decision that is readily more accessible to those who are not preoccupied with conceptual determinations: Faith is "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness ... the highest truth attainable for an existing individual" (Kierkegaard 1968: 40). Kierkegaard saw himself as imperfect, a sinner, but he did think highly enough of himself to consider that he was approaching the embodiment of faith he attributed to the pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus.

In all of this Kierkegaard seems to equivocate. He wants to valorize the faith of the common person, but he also aspires to the highest, most sophisticated articulation of embodied faith. He debunks the intellectual pretensions of the priesthood and professional philosophers, but he is not willing to give up the life of the privileged intellectual. The more he emphasizes simplicity of faith, the more complex his conceptual articulation; the more he critiques professional intellectuals, the more

he embraces his role as public intellectual. Perhaps this equivocation, as problematic as it is, might also be his strength, insofar as it resonates with those who see themselves as living in the age of the intellect yet who also yearn for a simpler life of faith – open to the divine infinite but well-grounded in the necessities of existence. In the end, these polar contrasts may be seen as a) revealing a deep contradiction in Kierkegaard, or b) as inverse correlation. In the case of the latter 'b)': the simpler the faith, the greater its conceptual articulation; the greater the debunking of professional philosophers, the greater his respect for "true" philosophy, what he calls "Socratic" ignorance/wisdom. Whether Kierkegaard falls more into either 'a)' or 'b)', it is hard to say. As we shall see, this problem of the relation between conceptual knowledge and its transcendence is presented from another perspective in the *Zhuangzi.*

Zhuangzi. Like Kierkegaard, there is a complex relationship between Zhuangzi the author and Zhuangzi as he appears in his own eponymous work. In the *Zhuangzi,* he appears as a simple farmer, married with children. He depicts himself as one among the many Daoist adepts, living close to nature, removed from the entanglements of power and discursivity, in rhythm with the Dao. Yet, the *Zhuangzi* is the work of a highly trained intellectual, at a time when most Chinese did not have access to the elite education necessary to produce such a literary classic. Very simply, it would have been virtually impossible to be a full-time farmer and sophisticated literati.

One of the most telling passages concerning Zhuangzi's own awareness of his own limitations in relation to living in the Dao occurs when he has a dream in which he finds himself conversing with a human skull. In this dialogue, he finds out that he has not attained freedom from his entanglements in the distinction between life and death, that he has not yet fully attained the freedom of the Dao:

> When Zhuangzi went to Chu, he saw an old skull, all dry and parched. He poked it with his carriage whip and then asked, "Sir, were you greedy for life and forgetful of reason, and so came to this? Was your state overthrown and did you bow beneath the ax and so came to this?...
>
> When he had finished speaking, he dragged the skull over and, using it for a pillow, lay down to sleep.
>
> In the middle of the night, the skull came to him in a dream and said, "You chatter like a rhetorician and all your words betray the entanglements of a living man. The dead know nothing of these!...

> Among the dead there are no rulers above, no subjects below, and no chores of the four seasons .... A king facing south on his throne could have no more happiness than this!" (Watson 2003: 116)

For all his philosophizing on the Dao beyond opposites, including that of life versus death, Zhuangzi finds that he still carries unspoken desires for life that keep him entangled in this world. Could this be the scholar-author Zhuangzi indirectly confessing that he is not the free-flowing farmer who blends effortlessly with the rhythms of Nature and the Dao?

If so, this could also cast new light on the earlier episode of Woodworker Qing. For in that episode, Qing must go through a preparatory phase, fasting and purifying his mind and body of any entanglements in this world before the Dao could flow through him, so that he could carve a bell stand as though it were the hand of Nature itself that effortlessly and transparently carved itself through his hand and the tree-meant-to-be-a-bell stand. That is, one way to imagine closing the gap between Zhuangzi as the author-literati and Zhuangzi as the farmer-Daoist adept would be if, reflecting on his mental entanglements, he engaged in a purifying regimen like that of Qing. This would stand in contrast with other figures such as Cook Ding who have no need of such preparation, free of the burdens of too much wrong-headed thinking as plagued those like Zhuangzi with his cumbersome intellectual apparatus.

Here we have the Daoist inverse correlation applied to Zhuangzi himself as an individual: The greater his reflections on himself as entangled in mental confusion, the greater the unfurling of the Dao before him, with the mediation of the skull-dream and a purifying regimen like that of Qing.

The text of the Zhuangzi leaves open to the imagination of the reader how Zhuangzi-the-author might have located Zhuangzi-the-Daoist in relation to all of this. Was he a literati and gentleman farmer who dabbled in a little of both scholarship and agriculture, bridging the gap with some self-purification exercises? Was he a scholar who only imagined the pristine world of Daoist adepts who lived simply in attunement with the natural Dao? Or, did he largely leave behind the world of learning and "high" culture to live like a Daoist recluse, away from the urban centers, nestled among the farmers in their villages? These are themes that find resonances and bear further exploration in relation to the medieval Japanese founder of Shin Buddhism Shinran.

Shinran. Shinran, once exiled from the religious and cultural center

of Kyoto and its environs out into the countryside, lived and worked among the peasants in the countryside from the age of approximately thirty until sixty, when he decided to return to Kyoto. Yet, he never stepped foot in a temple again, and lived out the last thirty years in his brother's modest house, writing virtually all of his works during that time until his death at the age of ninety, in 1262. At the very end of his *magnum opus,* the "Afterword" to the *Kyōgyōshinshō,* which he completed at the age of seventy-four, he stated, "I am neither monk nor layman" (Shinran 1969: 340).

At one level, the text of the "Afterword" makes clear that he was referring to his social and historical circumstances, in which he had been stripped of his priestly status, returned to lay status, but in which he continued to wear his robes in defiance along with his wife Eshinni, who also wore her robes. They thus carried out their ministry as outlaws, and he was "neither monk nor layman." At another level, this was his philosophical expression of emptiness and oneness, that in the truth of emptiness beyond conceptual distinctions, there are no religious distinctions of rank between monks and laity. Finally, it can be said that this was his expression of his own individual religious awareness, that he was not qualified to be considered either a good monk or a good Buddhist layman, that he was a foolish being, illuminated by the awakening of infinite light.

This confessional reading of his statement, "I am neither monk nor layman," accords with much of what he wrote throughout his oeuvre. For example, at the end of one of his hymns, he writes,

Yoshi ashi no moji o mo	Those who do not even know
shiranu hito wa mina	the characters for good and bad
Makoto no kokoro narikeru wo	All have honest, real hearts.
Zen'aku no ji shirigao wa	Those who pretend to know what is good and bad
Ōsoragoto no katachi nari	Are just putting on a show.
Zehi shirazu jashō mo wakanu	I do not know what is really right or wrong,
Kono mi nari	Orthodox or heterodox.
Shōji shōhi mo nakere domo	Though without the slightest mercy or compassion,
Myōri ni ninshi wo konomu nari	I want to be recognized and teach others (Shinran 1969: 462)

This stark statement gives recognition of his profound karmic foolishness, that he freely expresses in the embrace of boundless compassion. This is the standpoint expressed in the "Epilogue" to the *Tannishō,* the posthumous record of his statements compiled by his follower Yuien: "When I ponder the five profound aeons of contemplation carried out by Amida and expressed in the Vow [to bring all beings to the realization of oneness], I realize it is for myself, Shinran, alone" (Shinran 1969: 694). The hymn and this statement from the "Epilogue" express the inverse correlation of teacher and follower, outlaw priest and foolish laity, of Shinran as an individual foolish being and the illumination of limitless compassion.

Each of these three thinkers, Kierkegaard, Zhuangzi, and Shinran, contended with the circumstances of his times, the framework of his religious and philosophical thought, and his own individual limitations. While there is a great deal of diversity in the various factors that constellated their individual, social, and universal visions, they share in the fact that the effective force of their thinking and the impact of the paths they took derive in no small measure from the risk and courage attributed to each in facing and unmasking the delusions and false consciousness of those who held sway over the dominant intellectual and religious trends of their times, and of taking a stand on their own truths. The rhetorical force of their inverse correlations depends to a significant extent on the idea that they embodied their visions of inverse correlation, visions that were supposedly realized because they removed themselves from the dominant center and willingly occupied peripheral positions from which they could criticize the hypocrisy of their era, and seek out a path that was, to varying degrees, free from the corruption of the age.

VII. NISHIDA AND INVERSE CORRELATION

We began this examination of inverse correlation with reference to the work of the philosopher Kitarō Nishida. The concept of "inverse correlation," found in *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview,* his last major work, completed just two months before his death in 1945, expresses a theme that runs throughout his work. From his early formulation of "pure experience" through the "place of absolute nothingness" and on to "inverse correlation," Nishida was concerned to

resolve the problem of contradictory, polar opposites: subject and object, individual and universal, human and divine/buddha. As James Heisig states,

> Nishida crowned his treatment of God [or the ultimate] ... with a new idea introduced in his final essay, that of *inverse correspondence* [inverse correlation]. In logical terms, it is an extension of his idea of identity as the function of opposition, so that the stronger the opposition, the more deeply rooted the identity. The model of the application of this idea to religion is already present in his earlier remarks about how the sinner is the one who is most conscious of the moral ideal because the contradiction is constellated in him, and that "the more one is an individual the more one is confronted with the transcendent" (Heisig 2001: 103).

The intent here is not to retrace the arc of Nishida's thinking, as others have amply done (Heisig 2001: 29-106; Maraldo 2015). Rather, what this account provides is another way to frame the basic philosophical and religious problems with which he was grappling. As a philosophical thinker, he was seeking logical coherence and consistency, albeit one that had different parameters from what had formed much of the mainstream of modern Western philosophical discourse. "Inverse correlation" constitutes a culminating expression of his search for the right logical formulation. As well, however, "inverse correlation" helps to define the concrete framework of the existential and historical character of an actual life; the rhetorical force of Nishida's conception of inverse correlation derives from its socio-historical grounding in the possibilities of lived experience, similar to the ways in which Kierkegaard, Zhuangzi, and Shinran invoke the same kind of formal logic to express their philosophical and religious understanding. As James Heisig states, Nishida's conception of the ultimate such as "God was never merely an idea, but always an experienced" reality (Heisig 2001: 103). Thus, Nishida's concern with formal logical consistency was always inextricable from the subjective concern for lived existence in history.

Although "inverse correlation" in its explicit form can only be found at the very end of Nishida's work and life, it is arguably implicit from the very beginning. Understanding this can help one to better grasp Nishida's work as a whole as well as its broader ramifications, in particular the effects of the manner in which one succeeds and/or fails to take into account one's concrete socio-historical circumstances in applying the

formal logic of inverse correlation.[6]

At the early stage of his maiden work, *An Inquiry into the Good,* Nishida had not yet formulated the formal logic of the identity of opposites. Robert Wargo asserts that it was the problem of logical incompleteness in his formulation of "pure experience" that led Nishida to go on to formulate his logic of the place of absolute nothingness and the absolutely contradictory self-identity [of opposites] (Wargo 2005). In the middle period of his development of this logic of the absolutely contradictory self-identity [of opposites], Nishida was concerned as much with the consistency of the application of this formal logic as he was with its content, at times applying this logic to symmetrical pairs of polar opposites, such as subject and object, or materialism and idealism, at other times to asymmetrical pairs, such as individual and universal, in which the latter is the larger category while standing logically in perfect opposition to "individual." In his final work, *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview,* Nishida shifts more toward asymmetrical formulations with an emphasis on the specific religious content of his logic, where the individual is confronted with the Divine or Buddha as absolute, as transcending the particularity of the individual.

Nishida defines "pure experience" as that which is realized "prior to the separation of subject and object": "Pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified" (Nishida 1992: 3-4). As Wargo indicates, such a "pure experience" remains logically incomplete as the explanatory basis for all of reality because it is entirely self-referential, and any argument to establish it as the basis for reality ends up being circular. Some degree of circularity is unavoidable in any foundationalist view of reality. Wargo argues, however, that the "place of absolute nothingness" can be understood as a necessary postulate for establishing the grounds for polar opposites to co-exist in identity without positing a foundational

[6] Nishida's successor at Kyoto University, who was also his rival, Hajime Tanabe, criticized Nishida for his lack of attention to the social dimension and developed his "logic of species" (Jp. shu no ronri 種の論理) in response (Heisig 2001: 122-133). However, Tanabe's formulation tended to be rather abstract and to suffer a lack of grounding in the specific historical circumstances and realistic possibilities of the moment. Tanabe attempted to be more specific in his call for the Japanese to engage in national repentance in the wake of World War II in Philosophy of Metanoetics, but there, too, his grandiose scheme tended to lack a sufficient sense of realism (Heisig 2001: 134-156).

substrate. By its very nature, nothingness cannot be a substantial or real foundation. Rather it must be realized or embodied as that which is beyond all oppositions. Furthermore, this nothingness is realized without eliminating individuality; in fact, the realization of absolute nothingness only serves to heighten the realization of individual particularity. As John Maraldo states, "Rather than a mere absence of being, meaning, or function, absolute nothingness ... is the foundation of the world and of the self,... [yet] it is an uncommon kind of foundation in that it functions through self-negation. It cannot be called 'absolute' unless it negates any particular determination of it and simultaneously enfolds them all .... The world is one yet many; individuals are many yet one in their mutual determination" (Maraldo 2012: 3.1).

Of the episodes examined earlier, that of Woodworker Qing serves as a possible illustration of both "pure experience" and "absolute nothingness" as the place of the self-identity of absolutely contradictory opposites. First, by the time Qing has completed his fasting regimen, he has entirely forgotten himself and the categories that separate him from the world around him. At the same time, he has neither disappeared nor fallen unconscious. In fact, he is more vividly aware than ever, so that he can see with the eyes of Heaven (Nature) which tree is meant to be carved into a bell stand. Through the negation of "self" as a separate entity, he is manifesting the "pure experience" of the world to itself. Heaven, or the Cosmos as a whole, Nature as a whole, is a kind of place of nothingness, insofar as there are no humanly constructed categories intervening in the direct perception of reality. Nevertheless, Qing is vividly aware of multiplicity (trees) in the oneness/nothingness of pure experience. In carving the tree into a bell stand, he and the tree as individuals are "many yet one in their mutual determination": it is "'Heaven' matching up with 'Heaven.'"

Philosophically speaking, however, there is potential trouble brewing in the pristine setting of the woods in Nature. The bell stand, as humble as it is, is still an integral component of the centralized, discursive, center of power that is supposedly out of sync with the simple rhythms of nature. The bell stand, meant to hold the grand bells of the ruler and his court, is emblematic of the movement of human history that serves to reinforce the centrality of human society with all its complexity, not the simple life lived close to the earth. Can the functioning of the bell stand really be as natural as the changing of the seasons, or even the farmer tilling his fields? If not, then perhaps the bell stand is intended to be a provisional,

temporary construction in the larger cosmic scheme: Once the king or the ceremonial master recognizes its spiritual quality, they will gradually be drawn away from the artifice of the king's court toward a simpler life in the Dao? Or, is there a conceit here that cannot easily be explained away? Can one undo the complexities of human technology and artifice once they are in our possession? And what about Zhuangzi the scholar-author? Can he engage in a regimen similar to Qing, unlearn his high learning, and become the simple farmer he depicts himself to be?

These are not only questions for Zhuangzi, but perhaps also for us in the twenty-first century. It is the intellectual class, the scholars, who have been the driving force behind the remarkable technological advancements that pervade our lives. Yet, as the result of our own technological artifice, we may have set in motion a series of self-destructive processes that we as a species may have great difficulty overcoming. Is there a way to gain access to a more balanced life in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world while living in the world of social and technological complexity? What happens if we are in the process of destroying the very thing that gives us relief and solace away from the hustle and bustle of our computing and communications devices?

As a Protestant Christian thinker, Kierkegaard tends to emphasize that there is no return to a life of harmony in nature. The despairing self, unable to pull the opposing aspects of the self together in a happy synthesis of finite and infinite, becomes willful in its refusal to even recognize its own broken state, and this willfulness is what defines the self as sinful. The only path to truth and authenticity is to recognize the self in its profound sinfulness, in the light of belief, not in the self, which has failed, but in Christ, the sole exception to human sinfulness. The utter failure of the self is a self-negation, a kind of realization of nothingness that creates an opening for the power of faith in Christ to enter and inspire the self. The implication is that this inverse correlation can have a transformative effect, such that the believer can now move toward a positive realization of self as synthesis of the opposites, finitude and infinitude. Does such a self become qualified to "inherit the earth," as found in Matthew 5:3-5?

Kierekgaard, as one of the founding figures of Existentialism, asserted the primacy of the individual over against history, but he returned to the historical stage to affirm its significance at the end of his life with his work, penned in his own name, *Attack Upon "Christendom,"* in which he criticized the corporatized Christianity being preached as

little more than "disgusting hypocritical priestly fudge" (Kierkegaard 1968: 126). Although giving voice to his views under greatly differing circumstances, Kierkegaard is echoing the voice of Jesus when he stated, "But all their works they do for to be seen of men [for show] .... And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi" (KJV: Matthew 23:5-7).

Yet, as we have seen, Kierkegaard's own subject positionality in relation to his own historical circumstance was complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, he staked out a position on the periphery of the dominant order and aligned himself with the common person in order to criticize what he perceived to be the hypocritical spiritual materialism of the priesthood and those in positions of authority and power. On the other, he was a privileged intellectual who arguably only pretended to be one of the common folk, and who was able to pursue his philosophizing only because he had the time and leisure not available to many others. Yet, he ended his life destitute, having expended his resources so that he could give voice to his own convictions. Was he more like the privileged scholar, living in an ivory tower, pretender to faith, or was he a genuine voice of dissent and of faith in an age of corruption? And as a figure who has been highly influential in the development of Protestant thought, has the effect of Kierkegaard's philosophical reflections been, on the whole, edifying and transformative in a historical sense?

As Nishida's thought developed, he moved away from the conception of pure experience and increasingly addressed what he called the "historical world" (*rekishiteki sekai*). This eventually came to include the reflections on the role of individual nations and peoples, and the relations among a diversity of polities. He was beginning to adopt a Western-style view of historical progress and envisioned a special role for Japan in potentially helping to create a new world. Yet, whether unbelievably naïve or tragically complicit, the nationalistic and imperialistic tone of his formulations too easily dovetailed with the militarism of Japan during the first half of the twentieth century: "The imperial household [of Japan] is the alpha and omega of the world. The quintessence of our polity as a nation is the imperial family. It is the center from which all living, breathing development proceeds .... It is said to be like a family, and I agree with that. This is the beauty and strength of our polity" (Heisig 2001: 97). The troubling implications of such a statement are amplified many times by the fact that he was Professor of Philosophy

at Kyoto Imperial University, arguably one of the most influential intellectuals of his time. James Heisig argues that the intent of Nishida's statement was not to assert Japan's place or supremacy in a Western-style view of historical progress as manifest destiny. Rather, Nishida gave this formulation more as a symbolic or mythological expression of the communal expression of timelessness reflective of the inward realization of absolute nothingness (Heisig 2001: 97-98). Complementary to such a view, Michiko Yusa and others have documented how in various ways and in his personal life Nishida was deeply troubled by, wrestled with, and sought to subvert Japanese militarism (Yusa 2002). Regardless, it is hard to dispute that Nishida's public statements not infrequently jived too easily with the imperialism of Japanese military leaders.

Familial metaphors are often used to great effect in the context of towns, cities, institutions, and even nations. Here, it is not just that the metaphor is being invoked at the national level at a time of militaristic expansionism. There is a great difference between the discourse of 'family' invoked on behalf of a besieged community in the face of an oppressive, dominant culture and one that is expressed on behalf of the ascendant aggressor over what at the time were weaker nations. Where Nishida's own philosophy seemed to dictate a logic of inverse correlation in the relationship between the religious dimension and any particular body at the level of concrete particulars, he invoked a positive correlation, one that asserted pride and accomplishment rather than the humility and lack that allows one to open to and requires the sustenance of the infinite.

Of the three figures examined above – Kierkegaard, Zhuangzi, and Shinran, the one with the most evident influence on Nishida's formulation of inverse correlation is Shinran. The most direct statement of inverse correlation cited earlier, "Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil person," is taken from the *Tannishō,* a posthumous collection of statements attributed to Shinran. Nishida is said to have cited the *Tannishō* as one of his two most treasured sacred scriptures (Nishitani 1991: 26), and as Daniel Friedrich has shown, Shinran's thought was a major influence on Nishida throughout his life, and especially in his final work, *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview* (Friedrich 2006: 32). Shinran's view of history was the opposite of the kind of progressive view of history found in the Modern West. Instead, he subscribed to the view of *mappō,* the final degenerate age of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings when they became ineffectual and society became corrupt. Shinran saw himself living in such an age,

said to last ten thousand years, which might as well have been an eternity for Shinran and his followers.

This view of history correlated closely with Shinran's distancing himself from the dominant culture of corruption and instead identifying with the marginalized culture of farmers and fisherman among whom he lived and worked with his family until the age of sixty. For Shinran, the farther from the center of corruption, and the nearer to the life lived close to the earth, the better. Yet, in his own way, like Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard, Shinran saw himself unable to free himself of entanglement in the desire for fame and recognition that is part and parcel of the life of the literati and intellectuals: "Those who pretend to know what is good and bad are just putting on a show. I do not know what is really right or wrong, ... [and] though without the slightest mercy or compassion, I want to be recognized and teach others" (Shinran 1969: 462).

Among Nishida's contemporaries at Kyoto Imperial University, there were scholars who recognized what they believed to be the corrupting hand of the government's imperialistic ideology inserting itself into the academic culture of the institution. One of them was a legal scholar named Hiroshi Suekawa, a follower of Shinran's thought (Unno 1998). While Suekawa and his colleagues researched a wide range of legal issues and lectured about them, when they veered into territory that was considered too liberal and left-leaning, the Ministry of Education intervened, forbade certain topics of research, and suspended one of the faculty members. In what came to be known as the Kyoto University Incident of 1932, the entire faculty of the Law School resigned including Suekawa. In the post-war period, Suekawa went on to become one of Japan's leading legal scholars, editing the *Complete Six Codes of Law* (*Roppō zensho* 六法全書), the authoritative encyclopedic compendium of law that continued to be revised and published until 2013. He became a leading advocate of human rights, the rights of Koreans in Japan, *burakumin* outcasts, and labor unions. He eventually became Chancellor and President of Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, known for its evening division that made degree programs available for those who worked full time. This is not to say that Suekawa was a saint or did not have his critics; in keeping with his Shin Buddhist orientation, Suekawa saw himself as a foolish being with blind passions:

> Suekawa conceived human beings as both spontaneous expressions of deepest, boundless life and as the creators of their own karmic destiny,

> as buddha-nature and karmic nature, as "created and creator," to use a phrase he cited frequently. He saw in Shinran someone who traversed this difficult intersection of two natures, which he saw in himself as well as in others: "I think [Shinran] throughout his life grappled [with these questions]. I don't think he ever reached a point where he felt, 'I'm enlightened, I've found final spiritual repose.'" In his later years, Suekawa is often said to have uttered, "Bandits in the mountains are easy to defeat, but bandits in the heart are difficult to destroy" (Unno 1998: 82-83).

Rather, what his actions demonstrate is that, even in Japan which had a totalitarian regime until the end of World War II, there were intellectuals who found a way to follow a logic of inverse correlation more in keeping with Shinran's own view of society and history, one that was inclusive but recognized the virtues of and the need to empower those on the periphery.

The point here is not to extol Suekawa over Nishida. Suekawa was not a philosopher and could not make the philosophical contributions that Nishida made. Rather, in considering the possibility that the individual self exists in relation to a larger reality, whether it be the Dao, God, Amida Buddha, or Absolute Nothingness, Nishida's conception of inverse correlation provides the logical form that is implicit in many of these cases. Furthermore, we can see that the rhetorical effectiveness of the inverse correlation depends in significant part on the individual awareness of and situatedness or subject positionality in relation to the given socio-historical circumstances. More specifically, philosophers, as public intellectuals, may benefit from reflecting on the ways that Zhuangzi, Kierkegaard, Shinran, and Nishida may have variously examined or failed to examine their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to the cosmic order of reality, nature, the dominant social order, those who were marginalized or existed on the periphery, their own institutional settings, and their response to the contradictions and constellating factors of their selfhood. In the case of Nishida, here was a pioneer who ventured into uncharted territory and attempted to map out not only his own life but to survey the possibilities for Japanese philosophy in a global context. It can be argued that we are also facing new territory philosophically, as the human species in the twenty-first century potentially faces enormous challenges that are qualitatively different from those faced in the twentieth century. There may be darkness ahead, but the fact that thinkers before us have faced

this darkness should give us courage, knowing that they dared to invoke a logic of inverse correlation that held the promise of an even greater illumination. As Nishida states,

> From a human perspective, the human-divine relationship is effectively encapsulated in the statement by Zen master Daitō, "Buddha and I, separated by aeons yet not apart for even an instant; facing each other all day long yet never encountering each other for even an instant." It captures the contradictory self-identity of the divine-human relation. This is the world of the absolutely contradictory self-identity [of opposites], of negation-as-affirmation, [and affirmation-as-negation]. It must be this world of inverse [mutual] determination, of *inverse correlation*. Thus our religious mind and heart arise not from the [human] self but [in response] to the call of God or of Buddha. This is the working of the Divine or of the Buddha, arising from the Source of the self (Nishida 1989: 340; italics mine).

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KJV: *The Holy Bible*, King James Version

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