

Guide to the perplexed: an attempt to make sense of the Tillich-Hisamatsu Dialogues

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Abstract

The 1957 Harvard encounter between Paul Tillich and Zen master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu contains a wealth of information on the overlap and discrepancies between the two systems of thought, both individually and in regard to the larger East-West dialogue. This paper was written with the intent to mine the somewhat chaotic content of this historical document for elements leading to a systematic philosophical and theological investigation of underlying themes. In particular, it takes into account insights from Tillich's early German period to highlight the profound difference in his approach to the notion of paradox when compared to that of Zen Buddhism, a tradition he admired but was never fully able to penetrate.

Keywords: Tillich, Hisamatsu, East-West dialogue, Tillich's German period, Zen Buddhism.

Guia para os perplexos: uma tentativa de dar sentido aos diálogos entre Tillich e Hisamatusu

Resumo

O encontro de Harvard em 1957 entre Paul Tillich e o mestre Zen Shin'ichi Hisamatsu contém uma grande riqueza de informações a respeito de coincidências e discrepâncias entre os dois sistemas de pensamento, individualmente e em relação com o amplo diálogo Oriente-Occidente. Este artigo foi escrito na intenção de explorar o conteúdo um tanto caótico deste documento histórico à procura de elementos suscetíveis de levar a uma pesquisa sistemática filosófica e teológica dos temas subjacentes. Em particular, ele considera ideias do início do período germânico de Tillich, para esclarecer a profunda diferença na sua abordagem da noção de paradoxo em relação com a abordagem do budismo Zen, uma tradição que Tillich admirava, mas nunca foi plenamente capaz de penetrar.

Palavras-chave: Tillich, Hisamatsu, diálogo Oriente-Occidente, período alemão de Tillich, budismo Zen.

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Guía para el perplejo: un intento de dar sentido a los diálogos entre Tillich y Hisamatsu

Resumén

La reunión de Harvard en 1957 entre Paul Tillich y el Zen master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu contiene una riqueza de información sobre coincidencias y discrepancias entre los dos sistemas de pensamiento, tanto individualmente como en relación con el amplio diálogo East-West. Este artículo fue escrito con el fin de explorar el contenido algo caótico de este documento histórico en busca de elementos susceptibles de dar lugar a una investigación filosófica y teológica sistemática de temas subyacentes. En particular, considera las ideas germánicas tempranas de Tillich, para aclarar la profunda diferencia en su acercamiento a la noción de paradoja en relación con el enfoque del budismo Zen, una tradición que Tillich admiraba, pero nunca fue completamente capaz de penetrar.

Palabras-claves: Tillich, Hisamatsu, East-West, período alemán de Tillich, budismo Zen.

Introduction

Direct contact has a unique way of clarifying things, though often in a painful way – notably in the dialogue between cultures and religions. Among the major 20th century Christian theologians, Paul Tillich is probably the one who has most consistently shown appreciation for the world's religious traditions, including Buddhism, but it is only towards the end of his life that he had the opportunity to establish that direct contact through meetings with representatives of Japanese Zen.

Judging from the main available documents on this encounter, in the three 1957 dialogues with Zen master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu¹, the reality of Zen must have hit Tillich's inquisitive mind somewhat in the same way as "being" confronts "thinking," like an unmovable wall, in Tillich's own philosophy of religion. To Tillich's considerable credit, he did not in any way seek to remove the obstacle by rationalizing the existence of differences and disagreements. These differences, we will see, are as significant as the very real elective affinities between the Christian thinker who said that God "does not *exist*" and the Zen tradition that emphasizes nothingness.

The 1957 dialogues are thus not a case of generic confrontation between Christianity and Buddhism, but the meeting between the personal vision of Tillich's religious philosophy and the Zen Buddhism of 20th century Japan. Considered by commentators as a rather inconclusive, even clumsy attempt to bridge the big gap between East and West, these dialogues are actually

¹ Henceforth referred to as *Dialogues*.

revealing of the reasons that limit the extent of the family resemblance between the two sides.

A. Tillich and Buddhism

1) The starting point

Since Tillich had been discussing Buddhism in the context of his typology of religions since the early 1920s, it will be useful to start there in order to create the proper setting for an evaluation of the 1957 meetings. Tillich's position at that time (a position that would remain largely unchanged) is best expressed toward the end of his 1920 Berlin lecture (*Berliner Vorlesung*) on the philosophy of religion.

Buddhism is non-speculative. ... Its goal is immersion. Immersion into what, one might ask. The common philosophy of religion finds itself confronted by an enigma here, because it has never been able to detach itself from the speculative form of philosophy of religion. A God who is not hypostasized does not seem to be religious. The immersion of Buddhism, however, is immersion into pure substance (Tillich, 2000, p. 555-556)².

Tillich's last sentence here raises the decisive issue of the entire debate about the similarity and difference between Buddhism and Western theism, notably Christianity. For him, Western religious thought's original sin is to have succumbed to the temptation of objectifying God, making him into *a* Being, no matter how lofty and special, and speculating about his (its) nature. Buddhism, with its refusal of metaphysics and its negation of anything that could be identified as "god," offers a powerful alternative in his eyes.³ And that alternative is not an empty one, since the substance, the *Gebalt*, remains intact in its purest form⁴. Whether that is really the case may largely depend

² "Der Buddhismus ist unspekulativ... Sein Ziel ist ja Versenkung. Versenkung in was? könnte man fragen. Die übliche Religionsphilosophie steht hier vor einem Rätsel, weil sie nie losgekommen ist von der spekulativen Religionsphilosophie. Ein nicht hypostasierter Gott scheint nicht religiös zu sein. Nun ist aber die buddhistische Versenkung Versenkung in den reinen Gebalt". Our translation throughout.

³ Here, we will not be entering the complex question of how real the "atheism" of Buddhism is in view of the great variety of developments since its early beginnings. Tillich's understanding certainly applies to Zen Buddhism, which will be mainly discussed here.

⁴ It is to be noted that Tillich makes a clear distinction between *Inhalt* (content) and *Gebalt*. The latter is often translated as "substance", even though this German expression is as

on one's definition and perception of substance. It has, in any case, been at the center of the debate on the positive or negative nature of the Buddhist notion of emptiness, nothingness or *śūnyatā* and its relationship to the Western notions of being and non-being.

2) The debate

In his discussion of the experiential dimension of religion, Ninian Smart criticizes Rudolf Otto for conflating his famous notion of the numinous with that of mystical experience (Smart and Konstantine, 1991, p. 69). Smart's distinction between the two represents one of that author's own trademarks: the numinous is the divine experienced as an external Being that confronts us in its majesty, mysterious and both terrifying and attractive (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*); a mystical experience is one where the divine is perceived within, without any specific form or identity, and where the mind meets the void through "consciousness-emptying." That second form of religious experience applies both to Buddhism and medieval Christian mysticism, e.g., that of Meister Eckhart, the favorite Western reference for Zen Buddhists.

However, Otto insists that the notion of void or emptiness in Buddhist spirituality (and in the *via negativa* of middle age's mystical theology, though in a slightly different form) in fact accounts for the fullness of being on the level of experience. Non-being, for Otto, is then merely an ideogram used to describe the indescribable "wholly other" (Otto, 1926, p. 38). Thus, for him, there is identity between the core of being, the numinous, and non-being, because both symbolically express what cannot be adequately explained in rational language. Non-being is a negation of the rational concept of being, not the negation of its *Gebalt*: "The nonbeing of negative theology means 'not being anything special,' being beyond every concrete predicate. This nonbeing embraces everything; it means being everything; it is Being itself. The dialectical question of nonbeing was and is a problem of affirmative theology" (Tillich, 1951, p. 188-189).

impossible to adequately translate as the similar *Gestalt*. Both the more common *Inhalt* and *Gebalt* imply something that is included, or "held" within (*-halt*). *Inhalt* or content, however, is what is simply used to fill a pre-existing form that determines it, just as the Aristotelian matter is determined by form. *Gebalt*, on the contrary, implies that the content is the real substance that gives its being to the form – a form that can never be fully adequate in expressing it. There is thus a reversal of priority between the two. For Tillich, *Gebalt* represents the non-rational being of all things (the quality of just being there), which forms the counterpart to their rational form.

Keiji Nishitani speaks in similar terms: “The standpoint of *śūnyatā* ... is not a standpoint of simply negative negativity ... It is the standpoint at which absolute negation is at the same time ... a Great Affirmation” (Nishitani, 1982, p. 138). That is also very much the point of Shin’ichi Hisamatsu in his 1957 dialogues with Tillich, as we will discover. On the other hand, as Yoshinori Takeuchi puts it, in the discussion on being and non-being, Western philosophers and theologians regularly align themselves on the side of being, which plays a pivotal role in Western civilization. In Buddhism, the central notion is the idea of “nothingness” (Takeuchi, 1980, p. 1).

3) Non-being in the Western tradition

Thus, the tradition of Western thought strongly emphasizes being over non-being. But the latter, with its mysterious appeal, the questions it raises, and the *aporia* it often leads to in thought systems, has generated enough writing to fill volumes. The discussion starts with Parmenides’ famous denial of motion that would imply non-being or the negation of being, which is everything. In his dialogue *Parmenides*, Plato presents a meticulous analysis of the question of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ or ‘not-being’ and how they exclude each other (Plato, 1970, p. 195-197).

Later, when discussing *creatio ex nihilo* in his *Monologion*, St. Anselm, felt forced to clarify that nothing meant “not anything” and not some substance called nothing (Anselm of Canterbury, 1974, p. 16-17). Tillich himself has tried to revive the Ancient Greek distinction between absolute non-being, *ouk on* (οὐκ ὄν) and *me on* (μὴ ὄν), the non-being that has the potential for dialectical interaction with being. Thus, though being is the central focus of Western thought, non-being has literally been following it like a shadow. The reasons, from the Zen perspective, are obvious: being is not the Ultimate; it is a conceptual formulation of it and it automatically calls for its opposite, a process that can never be resolved on that level of rational thinking.

If we now turn to the Tillich-Hisamatsu dialogues, one critical point appears immediately: for Tillich, God is qualified as *esse ipsum* (Tillich, 1951, p. 234 ff., *passim*). For Buddhism, on the other hand, and particularly for Hisamatsu’s Zen, the realm of genuine reality is beyond being and non-being. Thus, what is the ultimate for one of the two thinkers (Tillich) is something to be overcome for the other (Hisamatsu), or so it seems.

B. Direct encounter: The Tillich-Hisamatsu dialogues

1) THE SETTING

Dr. Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, a lay Zen scholar and disciple of Kitaro Nishida, had spent the year 1957 as a visiting professor at Harvard. His lectures focused on his recently released book on Zen and the Fine Arts, which explains why the conversations he would have with his Western colleagues involved many exchanges about the meaning of art. On his way back to his home country in 1958, Hisamatsu would also visit Carl-Gustav Jung in Switzerland, near Zurich (Wirth, 2006, pp. 35-41) and Martin Heidegger in Freiburg, Germany (Copley, 1963)⁵.

The points of contact and similarities between the thought of Paul Tillich and Zen Buddhism are obvious and well-known, notably Tillich's ubiquitous use of the notion of paradox, but also his contention that negating the existence of God is essential to religiousness, rather than a sign of impiety – a paradox in itself.⁶ Furthermore, following his predecessors, the philosophers of religion Rudolf Otto and Ernst Troeltsch, Tillich has always maintained an open approach towards the world's religions, in stark contrast to Karl Barth and many of the 20th century's major theologians. In his latter years, he has particularly developed the dialogue with Eastern religions, acknowledging an affinity with the approach of Zen Buddhism, notably in one of his famous 1961 *Bampton Lectures* at Columbia University (Tillich, 1963)⁷.

Tillich's contribution to the dialogue between East and West has been acknowledged on both sides of the divide. His name is mentioned in just about every publication on the topic, and his work has been used as a prime example for a possible interface between the two approaches. On the Eastern side, this includes Kee Chong Ryu's *Nāgārjuna's Emptiness and Paul Tillich's*

⁵ The Hisamatsu-Heidegger discussion revolved specifically around the question of art. According to Jason Wirth, Hisamatsu received nothing but praise from Heidegger.

⁶ For an in-depth exploration of this questions, refer to: Robert R. N. Ross, *The Non-Existence of God. Linguistic Paradox in Tillich's Thought*.

⁷ There have been numerous other meetings between Tillich and representatives of Japan's religions and philosophy, both in the USA and in Japan. An example are the transcripts from recordings of two 1960 conversations Tillich had with Buddhist and Christian representatives in Japan, published by Robert W. Wood in *Japanese Religions*. See also Tillich's account of a visit to Japan in Hannah Tillich's second autobiographical publication, *From Place to Place. Travels With Paul Tillich, Travels Without Paul Tillich*.

God (Ryu, 1985) and Yoshinori Takeuchi's 1959 *Festschrift* in honor of Tillich (Takeuchi, 1959, pp. 291-365).

2) ELECTIVE AFFINITIES AND FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

The 1957 dialogues offer a good display of the already mentioned similarities and affinities between Tillich and Hisamatsu's Zen. In fact, they show that there are striking similarities between the two. These similarities are due to the fact that both have grappled with the same difficulties found in more traditional ways of thinking – be it Christianity or Buddhism. Before turning to the equally significant differences, I will offer a brief survey of the main points of contact or even agreement⁸.

A) THE RATIONAL DISCOURSE: INSUFFICIENT BUT INESCAPABLE

For both, the rational discourse is fundamentally unable to grasp the nature of reality, yet it cannot be discarded either. As Hisamatsu puts it, the “ultimate antinomy” or dichotomy between the positive and the negative, good and evil, needs to be solved at its root, something that cannot be done through cognitive learning, morality, or art. But he immediately adds: “Still, to solve this problem that reason cannot solve, there must be a solution that will nevertheless satisfy reason (*Dialogues*, p. 119)”. The desperate attempts by Hisamatsu and his translators to convey to Tillich the meaning of their religious philosophy through words, rather than through non-verbal ways, is symptomatic of that intent – and its challenges.

Tillich summarizes his own views at the beginning of the first encounter by saying that words are deceptive, but inevitable – they are “the only things which communicate (Stambaugh, 1999, p. 81).” In 1922 already, Tillich had stated that “‘Religion’ is the concept of a reality which through this very concept is destroyed. Yet the concept is unavoidable” and religion “can do nothing other than work with ... concepts” (Tillich, 1969, p. 139).

B) RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY: PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Here also, there is a similarity of views. For Tillich, “If a reunion of theology and philosophy is ever to be possible it will be achieved only in a

⁸ No attempt will be made here to summarize the content of the three loosely structured dialogues and their many recurrent themes. For a good overview, see Joan Stambaugh's *The Formless Self*.

synthesis that does justice to this experience of the abyss in our lives [revealed by WW I]. My philosophy of religion has attempted to meet this need. It consciously remains on the boundary between theology and philosophy, taking care not to lose the one in the other. *It attempts to express the experience of abyss in philosophical concepts...* [emphasis added]" (Tillich, 1966, p. 52).

In his conversation with Carl-Gustav Jung, who warned him that he (Jung) was a psychologist, and not a philosopher, Hisamatsu responds: "In a sense, one might say that Zen is a philosophy, but it is very different from ordinary philosophy, which depends on human intellectual activity. One might therefore say that Zen is no philosophy. Zen is a philosophy and at the same time a religion, but no ordinary religion. It is 'religion and philosophy'" (Jung and Hisamatsu, 2002, p 112).

C) WHAT IS RELIGION?

The overall question, "what is religion?" for the two thinkers is too far-reaching to be dealt with here, though a collection of Tillich's early essays in English has appeared under that very title. One can nevertheless briefly note that both Hisamatsu and Tillich similarly seek the validity of religion not in the assumed truth of its dogma, but in the demonstration that it is a necessary function of the human mind, separate from all other aspects, yet related to them. Hisamatsu speaks of religion's "objective validity" that should be different from that of science, art and morality. Tillich says as much when he affirms that religion is the most fundamental constitutive function of human consciousness, but at the same time should not be considered apart from the other functions (Tillich, 2000, pp. 338, 345-346, *passim*).

D) THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Hisamatsu's Zen and Tillich's religious philosophy both stand in contrast to the sacred-profane dichotomy proper to most religious traditions (including much of Buddhism) and discussed by authors like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. In his lengthy explanations on Zen art, Hisamatsu explains that, unlike other forms of Buddhism, Zen does not focus on the formal or cultish elements of sacred motifs. Rather, Zen art finds its material in "what ordinarily would be considered most insignificant – or, indeed, profane" (*Dialogues*, p. 133). At the same time, along with Tillich, he deplors the secularization of Japanese art that began with the Tokugawa dynasty (1603-1868). Secularization, here, means a secularization of attitude. For

Zen, in art and in life, reaching the “Formless Self” (Hisamatsu’s key word, explained below) is a matter of Awakening, and this takes place in the midst of the most mundane of circumstances.

For Tillich, a consciousness that is entirely profane is unthinkable. “There is no thing that doesn’t carry religious qualities through its relationship to the irrational substance of Being. Nothing is profane as such” (Tillich, 2000, p. 407)⁹. In other words, “there is no consciousness unreligious in substance, though it can certainly be so in intention” (Tillich, 1969, p. 139). Religiousness inevitably accompanies the human mind’s orientation towards the *Unconditional*,¹⁰ even if expressed in the most secular ways. On the other hand, making God into a sacred thing or Being, even the highest one, is real atheism, because it makes God into what he is not.

In his 1961 Bampton lectures, Tillich explicitly and repeatedly refers to the convergence between Japan and the West on the issue of secularization (Tillich, 1963, pp. 12, 24-25, 62). Both are highly developed industrial nations where the main challenge to the dominant religion comes from secularism and quasi-religions (nationalism, communism, liberalism), rather than from competing religions. Tillich sees this common challenge as a potential starting point for a future dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. In fact, this is also the starting point of the 1957 encounter. Tillich says that he is able to focus amidst the noise and confusion of his environment by concentrating on *something* (his task), but admits that this is no longer enough for him. To which Hisamatsu replies that what Tillich needs is Zen’s *objectless* concentration.

E) THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OBJECTIFICATION

Perhaps the most significant point of convergence is the insight that there is no such thing as an objectified, ultimate reality of any kind. Since the very beginning of his academic career after World War I (1919 and 1920), Tillich has led the charge against “objectification,” what he saw as Western metaphysics’ mistaken assumption that it is possible to grasp God by identifying him conceptually as the Absolute Being, something Martin Heidegger

⁹ “*Es gibt kein Ding, das nicht durch seine Beziehung auf den irrationalen Seinsgehalt religiöse Qualitäten in sich tragen würde. Es gibt nichts schlechtthin Profanes*”.

¹⁰ The German noun *das Unbedingte* has been translated as either the “Unconditioned” or the “Unconditional” by Tillich’s classic translator, James Luther Adams. Tillich used the Unconditional in his American period. I have maintained *Unconditional* when quoting translations that use this form and chosen *Unconditioned* in all other cases.

would later refer to as onto-theology. For Tillich, “the Unconditional stands beyond both subject and object” (Tillich, 1969, p. 125). Experientially, this also means that recovering a faith lost through the onslaught of secularization by rationally demonstrating the existence of a Being called “God” is absurd. It is a self-defeating illusion (Tillich, 2000, pp. 338-339).

Similarly, at the very beginning of his first conversation with Tillich, Hisamatsu indicates that Zen “means going beyond the subject-object scheme” (Hisamatsu and Tillich, 1990, p. 81). Concentration must also be “objectless” and “subjectless, i.e., non-dualistic” (*Ibid.*, p. 85-86). The Formless Self, in short, transcends both subject and object, just as it transcends all other pairs of dual characteristics. This typical feature appears throughout Hisamatsu’s discourse. Thus, Tillich and Hisamatsu share a common understanding that the ultimate cannot simply be grasped as a thing¹¹.

C. RESULTS OF THE ENCOUNTER

1) Failure?

It is thus rather surprising to see how difficult it has been for Tillich to grasp and digest the paradoxical thought of Zen when confronted with it directly in his three discussions with Hisamatsu. As Newman Robert Glass puts it, “the fact that such an accomplished thinker as Tillich seems to come off so poorly in the exchange should be humbling to us all” (Glass, 2004, p. 301)¹². In these dialogues, Tillich is clearly in the position of the learner, though a very respected one. Hisamatsu was an invited guest lecturer from Japan. He was already well aware of Tillich’s thought and other Western philosophies and theologies. The purpose of his journey was to disseminate knowledge about the yet unknown practice of Zen, especially Zen art.

Yet, if Tillich comes off poorly in his efforts to grasp the meaning of Zen, so does Hisamatsu in his attempt to convey it. His translator De Marti-

¹¹ In his third Bampton Lecture (p. 67), Tillich notes that “the *esse ipsum*, Being itself, of the classical Christian doctrine of God, is a transpersonal category and allows the Christian disputant to understand the meaning of absolute nothingness of Buddhist thought. The term points to the unconditional and infinite character of the Ultimate...”.

¹² For a similar critical assessment of Tillich’s ability to understand Zen, see Joan Stambaugh’s *The Formless Self*, pp. 55-97. Both authors primarily aim at Tillich’s perceived difficulties in understanding the paradoxical thought of Zen from the perspective of his western thinking in terms of universals and particulars (see below).

no¹³ repeatedly shows considerable frustration over the master's unwillingness to teach Tillich Zen by using the Zen way – that of direct showing, rather than logical reasoning. “For some reason he did not deal with you fully as a Zen teacher, which I believe he should have” (*Dialogues*, p. 169).¹⁴ To which Fujiyoshi, the Japanese translator, comments: “I don't think that ... would have been quite appropriate.” There is a mildly humorous exchange over the possibility of Hisamatsu punching Tillich in the stomach to make his point, but things never evolve even remotely in that direction. For whatever reason, Hisamatsu feels obliged to maintain his academic courtesy all the way to the (dead) end.

This inability to really penetrate each other's mental world, in spite of a relative flexibility and considerable good will on both sides, can easily result in some disappointment on the part of the reader. This is unfortunate because, in spite of the protagonists' failure to reach mutual understanding, the discussion results in a most important achievement: it clearly shows that the inevitable disagreement is based on the unique and different identities of the two thought systems and their frames of reference. The lengthy exchange, continued over three sessions, with the help of a Japanese and a Western translator, both knowledgeable of the issues as well as the languages involved, exposes the demarcation lines between the two thoughts much better than any document produced separately by the two authors or by a third party. The sometimes chaotic and repetitive nature of the discussion is more than compensated by the fact that neither discussion partner is allowed to indulge in wishful thinking. The constant presence of the other side makes it impossible for either of them to fantasize into existence an imaginary solution supposed to be valid from everyone's perspective.

This certainly explains why both Tillich and Hisamatsu appear to stress the differences between their respective visions more than the common points noted above. Both obviously felt the need to clarify the boundaries

¹³ Dr. Richard de Martino, from Temple University in Philadelphia, was himself an accomplished scholar who published together with D.T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm and Masao Abe. He had also been Tillich's student.

¹⁴ Earlier on in the third dialogue, De Martino had suggested that Dr. Tillich was “ready for more...” (p. 149). He finally concluded that his inadequate translation might be to blame for Hisamatsu's inability or unwillingness to engage Tillich in a “non-verbal manner.” But a careful reading of the transcript does not leave that impression. Hisamatsu's response was deliberate, following an extensive exchange that cannot have left any doubts about Tillich's state of mind and his expectations.

while their counterpart was directly present and able to answer questions. In his third *Bampton Lecture*, Tillich would offer a systematic reflection on the relationship between the two approaches, putting much more emphasis on the common ground and the potential for cooperation between Buddhism and Christianity. Unquestionably, the encounter with Hisamatsu, with all its occasional bluntness, provided him with much of the material for his assessment and therefore deserves to be examined in some detail.

2) Paradox and contradiction

At first, one might have the impression that Tillich, the theologian of paradox, has at last met a thought that is too paradoxical even for him to comprehend or digest. In fact, the exact opposite is true. It is not Hisamatsu's paradoxical statements that irritate Tillich and leave him perplexed. It is the fact that Hisamatsu presents the Zen way as the complete resolution of the paradoxes he so eloquently states. And it is that which prompts Tillich to reply: "On this issue ... there is apparently a profound difference between us. *What I would like to comprehend is how his position is even possible* (emphasis added)" (*Dialogues*, p. 149)¹⁵. It is thus by examining the respective approaches to paradox and its solution that progress will be made in understanding the positions of Tillich and Hisamatsu. This, in turn, will lead to an analysis of what transcends the pervasive dichotomy of reality, Tillich's pure Being and Hisamatsu's Formless Self respectively.

3) The extent of the solution – and its nature

One *leitmotiv* in Hisamatsu's conversations with Tillich and Jung is his insistence on the radical, complete nature of the solution provided by the Zen approach. This comes with Hisamatsu's equally insistent attempts to figure out to what extent his discussion partners even *claim* to find such a solution in their own approach. In his 1958 meeting with Carl Gustav Jung, Hisamatsu asks "Can psychotherapy liberate us from suffering in one fell swoop?" (Jung and Hisamatsu, 2002, p. 115). When he further asks whether

¹⁵ Tillich's candid *eris du coeur* stands in contrast to Hisamatsu's much more self-assured and matter-of-fact reply earlier on in the conversation, when dealing with the same topic: "It is not that you cannot maintain your position, it is more that we are unable to accept your position." This self-assurance, along with Zen's appearance on the Western scene in the 1960s might explain Tillich's otherwise surprising characterization of Buddhism as a "most competitive" religion in his 3rd Bampton Lecture (p. 54).

one can be liberated from the unconscious through psychotherapy, much to his surprise Jung answers “Yes!” The editor of the English version is probably right when he assumes that Jung’s answer must have been accompanied with some sense of exasperation not visible in the transcript. He is probably also right in assuming that it is that (and not the translation problems between Hisamatsu’s Japanese and Jung’s Swiss German dialect) which prompted Jung to prevent publication of the dialogue during his lifetime (*Ibid*, p. 119, Note 8). Except for that brief moment, when he perhaps felt forced to preserve the dignity of his method under the pressure of questioning, Jung makes it abundantly clear that suffering is inevitably part of life (he quotes Schopenhauer) and that psychotherapy’s goal is merely to help people deal with it, instead of escaping into neurosis when facing the inevitable rainy days.

Jung uses *nirdvandva* throughout, rather than the more common *nirvana* used by Hisamatsu. The Sanskrit *nirdvandva* means “freedom from opposites” and fits Jung’s outlook much better than *nirvana*, the complete extinction of dualism and opposition. Jung believed that we can learn to manage tensions, not obliterate them. And for Tillich, as he states himself in the dialogues, the solution consists of a dialectical movement towards an infinite horizon (the Kingdom of Heaven) that can never be historically achieved. This exposes him to the same challenge as Jung: Hisamatsu questions the adequacy of their methods on the ground of their relative nature. What now follows is not an attempt to describe the essence of Hisamatsu’s philosophy or that of Zen in general, something that is both impossible and unnecessary in the present context. It is an effort to show why and how his philosophy and that of Tillich differ in spite of many convergences, notably from the ontological perspective. A section on Tillich’s position will follow.

4) Hisamatsu: radical antinomy and the Formless Self

A) ANTINOMY

For Hisamatsu, the predicament of human life lies in the fact that in every aspect of reality, every single entity is ineluctably accompanied by its opposite. The best summation of his position is found in the following statement:

What I consider to be the ‘ultimate antinomy’ is neither exclusively of logic nor of will nor of feeling; it involves all three. It cannot be reduced, therefore, either to contradiction, dilemma, or agony; all three are there as one.”

De Martino further clarifies: “In Dr. Hisamatsu’s view, human nature is such that these several components coalesced as one delineate man’s cardinal contradictory antagonism – or ‘dualistic opposition’ (*Dialogues*, p. 117).

Antinomy is a term that Hisamatsu explicitly borrows from Kant, for whom it however applies strictly to an *aporia* of human cognition when applied to the realm of the transcendent. Hisamatsu speaks of “ultimate antinomy” to designate an opposition that reaches across all dimensions of life. This dichotomy between the positive and the negative, to use another favorite expression of Hisamatsu, includes the “onto-existential” pair of being and non-being, the “axio-logical” pair of good and evil, the beautiful and the unbeautiful in aesthetics, and the true and untrue in cognition.

For Hisamatsu’s Zen, this conflation of vastly different forms of duality and opposition, typical of the influence of Taoism,¹⁶ means that there is no aspect of reality that can be unequivocally grasped by human life or action, no safe haven at all where one is free from the counter-effects of antagonism and opposition. Hisamatsu seems to be exclusively concerned with the struggles created by the inevitable presence of an opposing entity for each existing entity, e.g., evil opposing good. He does not show any interest for a yin-yang type complementarity of opposites. All attempts to balance out the “relative contradictions” of existence or to solve them while maintaining them can only lead to unsatisfactory, partial and temporary solutions in his eyes. Hence, the only solution is to go through the Great Doubt of radical questioning of all aspects of existence, leading to the Great Awakening of the Formless Self. Thus, Hisamatsu jumps from a rejection of everyday reality that goes well beyond Tillich’s own denial of its legitimacy to a Great Affirmation that goes even further beyond anything that Tillich could accept or even fathom – the absolute tranquility of full detachment, reached in the blinking of an eye.

When Hisamatsu speaks of what is attained through the Great Awakening that puts an end to our existence of conflict and pain, his words remain, predictably, very paradoxical, since they bring together what words can’t bring together. But in that, he is no different from the Zen masters of the past (e.g., Dōgen) or his contemporaries from the Kyoto School. Neither is he

¹⁶ Below, we will see how Tillich challenges the treatment of good and evil as a pair of correlative elements standing on a same footing, as in white vs. black, day vs. night.

really any different from the ancient Indian thinker Nagarjuna: “For Nagarjuna, the insight of apprehension of the emptiness of things is the wisdom of ‘seeing things as they really are,’ namely, in the *Suchness* or *Thusness* which is beyond all descriptions and distinctions between subject and object, and between reality and non-reality (Ryu, 1985, p. 156)”.

What makes Hisamatsu’s statements particularly difficult to comprehend for the Cartesian mind is that the transcendence of every form of dichotomy is not only expressed in a negative way (beyond being and non-being) but also in a positive way (being and non-being *at the same time*). It seems like all the oppositions and contradictions that are source of pain in the everyday world find themselves again in the state of nirvana (*samsara sive nirvana*), only that the contradiction is no longer contradiction and the opposition is no longer opposition. Contraries coexist in one point that is beyond space and time, beyond existence and non-existence, and so on, the Formless Self. This “Formless Self” is at once one’s own and not one’s own. It is and it is not” (*Dialogues*, p. 92). We are in a realm where none of the usual laws apply and where our intellect is powerless – in fact, obliterated¹⁷.

B) THE FORMLESS SELF

As explained early on in the first dialogue, the *Formless Self*¹⁸ is Hisamatsu’s own formulation of what in Zen is more commonly designated as “No-Mind” or “No-Consciousness.” Occasionally, he would also call it the Calm Self or the True Self, terms that express its qualities. It immediately appears that, in this, Hisamatsu comes down on the side of affirmation, rather than negation in his evaluation of *śūnyatā*,¹⁹ since the expression “Formless Self” is only negative through the suffix –less, whereas Self is an affirmation

¹⁷ On this point, the Zen approach is not without similarities with German Idealism and Romanticism and their emphasis on the difference between *Verstand* (understanding) and *Vernunft* (reason), the former referring to the grasping of reality in the form of discrete entities, never succeeding in grasping the reality of the whole or its ultimate meaning, the latter referring to the wisdom of true reason, which is capable of transcending this analytical approach. But Zen’s approach is much less intellectual.

¹⁸ The original Japanese expression translated as Formless Self never appears in the published version of the dialogues. It is: 無相の自己 (*musou no jiko*). A more casual form, carrying the exact same meaning, is sometimes also used in the literature: 形なき自己 (*katachi na ki jiko*). Both expressions correspond quite literally to the English translation used by Hisamatsu and his translators.

¹⁹ A term he actually does not use.

not found in “No-Mind” or “No-Consciousness.” The very fact of choosing an expression containing “self” might be construed as a departure from the original Buddhist view, but it also reminds one that “self” has a vastly different meaning in East and West. At the same time, it hints at the possibility of a convergence, since Hisamatsu describes the Formless Self in a way that is meant to be faithful to Buddhism and (hopefully) acceptable to a Christian thinker like Tillich.

According to Kitaro Nishida, the founder of the Kyoto school, “formless” is as important in East Asian thought as form or idea in Western thought: “In contradiction to Western culture which considers form as existence and formation as good, the urge to see the form of the formless, and hear the sound of the soundless, lies at the foundation of Eastern culture” (Nishitani, 1982, p. xxv).

Out of the formless, every form can arise, therefore it is more important that any given form that comes and goes and will always find its opposite. At least on the surface, there is a clear similarity to the role of the *apeiron* (the indeterminate) in the thought of Anaximander. Contrary to what Tillich suggests, the Formless Self does not “swallow” all forms – it actually gives them their real nature: “It is because of the working of the Self without form that things with form appear. Form is not threatened by the Formless Self; rather it is only because of the free working of the Formless Self that there emerge things with form” (*Dialogues*, p. 89). The Formless Self is not abstract – it is the individual things that we identify as such (glass, table) that are abstractions. Things can receive their true identity when apprehended in their “Suchness” through the non-discriminating activity of the Formless Self.

Formless *Self* also clearly expresses that Hisamatsu is not speaking of an “emptiness” or “nothingness” that would somehow be the counterpart to the theistic concept of God. The process of emptying and detachment is an eminently existential one²⁰. The Formless Self that emerges through detachment and *satori* belongs to another dimension than the one we are used to, but obviously this does not mean that it belongs to some distant galaxy, as Hisamatsu notes. Nevertheless, he and his translators find themselves immediately at odds with words when trying to describe the “other-dimensional”

²⁰ Hisamatsu here compares the Zen approach with that of Meister Eckhart. The exchange is inconclusive as to the extent of the similarity between the two – the typical result of any discussion on Western vs. Eastern mysticism.

reality in non-spatial and non-temporal expressions – by using a language that remains inevitably tied to time and space (*Dialogues*, p. 80 ff.).

c) METAPHYSICS

Thus, even though Zen Buddhism is well known for its rejection of metaphysics, its starting point is profoundly metaphysical, in that it does not seek grounding in our physical or even mental reality. Its grounding is a step into the “wholly other” (in this sense, Otto was certainly right). When Hisamatsu and representatives of Zen make statements about that step, even descriptive ones, it is hard not to see in them metaphysical assertions (e.g., “[The] Formless Self is at once one’s own and not one’s own. It is and it is not”, *Dialogues*, p. 16-17). And these statements encounter all the difficulties of metaphysical statements, even though they are not meant to logically explain anything about that “other” reality. They are still a discourse on that reality, a reality that is beyond discourse. The metaphysical dimension of the discourse is confirmed by Hisamatsu’s insistence that what he speaks about is neither a new “psychological awareness” nor a mere “state of mind” (*Dialogues*, p. 79 ff.). It is the Awakening to the Formless Self in which the seer and the seen are one and the same (there is a long discussion on art). The Formless Self, which is both one’s own and not one’s own, is what everyone should awake to, but unfortunately doesn’t.

From that perspective, the paradox thus remains a surface phenomenon – it is the way the Suchness of things is expressed in everyday dualistic language. Paradoxical statements are dramatic means of testifying to that state of things. They show that the breakthrough into the reality of the Formless Self leads into a realm where ordinary language cannot be applied effectively and, by their impact on the mind, they suggest what lies below the surface. They also give a hint that might lead the listener to eventual Enlightenment and real understanding.

5) Tillich: irreducible paradox and dialectic

A) THE NATURE OF PARADOX

Tillich’s background is of course vastly different from Hisamatsu’s. It is not that obvious fact, but rather the partial convergence between his views and those of Zen that deserved to be highlighted, which has been done above. In the dialogues, direct references to Tillich’s own thought are limited

to occasional questions by Hisamatsu, destined essentially to make sure that he had understood Tillich properly, and the response is usually affirmative. The opposite is not always the case. The main reason for Tillich's difficulties appears to be the fact that his own strong views remain as an insurmountable obstacle not only to agreement but, on occasion, to insight as well.

Since Tillich's position is not extensively explained in the three dialogues, it is necessary to refer to his earlier positions on the key themes involved if one is to have more than a marginal chance to understand the exchange properly. Tillich's position is best summed up in a well-known passage of his 1922 lecture on *The Conquest of the Concept of Religion*. Like Hisamatsu's statement on the universality of dichotomy quoted above, this passage links the various realms of human life and explains how the notion of paradox applies to them. But the orientation, hence the conclusion, are significantly different.

Tillich explains that a paradox can be either the product of "artistic imagination", i.e., it is an ingenious, intriguing, or enigmatic formulation meant to highlight a key point through "ambiguous and contradictory verbal formulation" or it can be of a logical nature, where "it refers to the tension of two patterns of thought which are contradictory, though in themselves consistent and necessary." Both are a function of the subject's mind and can be solved with common sense and logical thinking.

But, Tillich adds, there is a third type of paradox:

... a point where paradox is grounded completely in the object rather than in the subject, where paradox is as necessary to every assertion ...: the point at which the Unconditional becomes an Object. The fact that it becomes an object is indeed the primal paradox, since by its nature the Unconditional stands beyond the antithesis of subject and object. Thus, every statement about the Unconditional is necessarily in the form of a paradox. ... The paradox of the Unconditional is not resolvable. It poses a problem that calls for intuition (*Schauen*) (Tillich, 1969, pp. 122-123).

Unlike Hisamatsu, Tillich speaks of *paradox*, not contradiction. Tillich is not disturbed like Hisamatsu by the presence of non-truth next to truth. However, there is one ultimate paradox that can never be solved, because it is located in the Unconditioned, the Absolute, or Being (God), that cannot be an object (it is beyond subject and object) and yet can only be grasped by our mind when it is made into an object of thought. It is to be noted that

the paradox is seen by Tillich as affecting *statements* about the Unconditioned, not the Unconditioned itself. This nevertheless means that for us, paradox is inevitably involved in relating to that Unconditioned.

Thus, the paradoxical statements by Hisamatsu that hint at a total dissolution of the very opposition they state annoy Tillich considerably. He does not see their point or their validity and dismisses them as word plays. The reasons for Tillich's fundamental disagreement (though occasionally one gets the feeling that he *wishes* he could agree) can be found in the double background of his spiritual, academic, and personal life. The starting points of Tillich's *Weltanschauung* are Christian faith and rational Western philosophy, exemplified by the direct influences of Martin Luther and Immanuel Kant respectively. This leads us to at least two elements of irresolvable paradox in Tillich's thought: a philosophical one and a Christian-existential one, both closely related.

B) PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

In his early years, Tillich was very much concerned with reconciling the "substance" of religious experience with the contemporary secular worldview. The obstacle to that undertaking he saw in the paradoxical relationship between being and thinking. "Paradoxy means that thinking is forced to affirm something [being] that contradicts its own form" (Tillich, 2000, p. 524)²¹.

In the elaboration of his *critical-intuitive* or *metalogical method* in his early years at Berlin University, Tillich brings these two elements together, but sees their convergence as an irremediably paradoxical one. Reason can and will never reduce Being to its own rules and has to capitulate. Only intuition can go further. On the other hand, faith can't reject as invalid the questions and challenges of reason either. The only solution to this dilemma will be for reason to seek an approximation in attempting to account for Being through symbols that are as appropriate as possible. Through continuous refinement and breaking points, one can thus approach a situation where both faith and reason converge, but the actual meeting point will always remain on the infinite horizon.

In his 1920 lecture on the philosophy of religion, Tillich offers a "platonian myth" where a stone, by its very existence, challenges thought. Thou-

²¹ "Paradoxie bedeutet ja, daß das Denken gezwungen ist, etwas zu bejahen, das seiner eigenen Form widerspricht."

ght responds to the challenge by declaring the stone a mere object of its thinking activity. But then, says Tillich, thought feels lonely and miserable in its victory – it has lost the very thing that it was longing for, being, the thing that also irritated it by its presence (*Ibid.*, p. 400). This is a clear reference to Otto’s *mysterium tremendum and fascinans*²². Towards the end of his 1920 lecture, Tillich concludes: “Religion is the function of consciousness or function of the phenomenal world in which thinking experiences its relationship to mere being in its double aspect of terror and bliss (*Grauenvolles und Beseligendes*) (Tillich, 2000, p. 522)”. With this, we leave the realm of mere philosophy, be it philosophy of religion.

c) *Good and evil - sin and guilt*

For Tillich, the *mysterium* or “mystery” (which has become a common code word for God in contemporary theology) faces humans of all ages and all cultures as the supreme reality that is both attractive (offering us what cannot be found in this world) and scary, because totally beyond our control and source of judgment. In terms of Christian theology, this is of course the God of judgment and grace, sin and salvation.

Tillich’s incredulous response to Hisamatsu’s absolute claim quoted above comes with an explanation, and it is not related to cognition or aesthetics, but to that precise question of sin: “Dr. Hisamatsu seems, then, to be at a point that has nothing to do with sin or guilt (emphasis added) (*Dialogues*, p. 149).” The total liberation *bic et nunc* announced by Hisamatsu is not even conceivable as a theoretical possibility from Tillich’s Christian perspective²³.

²² In reference to Rudolf Otto’s numinous, Tillich indicates in 1923 that, besides the “mystery of depth” (*Mysterium des Grundes*) there is also the mystery of light and that both are equally unconditioned and irreducible to one another. Both are equally legitimate (Tillich, 1923, p. 185).

²³ Again, for Tillich, the paradox is not a starting point that can be overcome – it is the core of reality. Christianity, the religion of the cross with the Savior who denies his own affirmation to the point of death is the highest religion because it most fully accounts for the paradoxical nature of reality. It is the religion of paradox, as expressed in the Bible’s own paradoxical passages, such as “the first will be the last” and “those who want to lose their life will save it and those who want to save their life will lose it.” In a June 7, 1960 encounter with Japanese Christians, Tillich explicitly, even bluntly indicates that, on this point, Zen runs the considerable danger of elevating the self above its natural limitations, as a form of self-aggrandizement – a comment that is made in reference to another discussion with Hisamatsu. Tillich also makes the comparison with the danger of demonic *hybris* in Catholic monasticism (Wood, 1961, p. 59).

Tillich's wife Hannah, who participated in the three encounters with Hisamatsu, offers this description of Tillich by a Japanese Zen master: "Not one of the enlightened yet," because "he still made the distinction between 'good' and 'evil'" (Tillich H., 1973, p.24). One need not take Hannah Tillich's description entirely at face value to find it largely credible.

Interestingly, when Hisamatsu makes the statement that, from the Zen perspective, the awakened one should be able to say "I am the ultimate," his main translator, De Martino, agrees with Tillich that he too would be shy to make such a statement "as of this moment" (*Dialogues*, p. 159). Apparently, De Martino's theistic background stands in his way. Hisamatsu, on the contrary, insists that Buddha-hood or Christ-nature should not be limited to one special, divine individual and that all humans have the potential to become the ultimate beyond any notion of good and evil: "Non-dualistic ultimacy does not – and should not – make one hesitant to proclaim that one is oneself 'ultimate.' The sort of ultimacy that might cause such a reluctance most likely involves the judgment of good and evil (*Ibid.*)".

But, for both, the question of evil or sin and the way to overcome it are related to the notion of a fall into *finitude*, which makes Tillich's position unorthodox from a Christian perspective. Essential is the fact that, for Tillich, sin and evil involve the notion, and even more the experience, of judgment by a "wholly other" ultimate that is more than just a new dimension of one's self. This all leads us quite naturally to the underlying issue of the entire discussion: is there anything comparable in the ultimate in Christian theism, even Tillich's unconventional one, and the Zen notion of the ultimate as Formless Self? Is Tillich's optimistic assessment that Buddhism's notion of emptiness is a non-hypostasized equivalent of God, or pure *Gehalt*, warranted? If the question of evil, hence judgment by an Ultimate, makes it doubtful, so does the question of the particular, through which the individual participates in that Ultimate, or incarnates it.

D) THE ISSUE OF THE PARTICULAR

Out of all the questions discussed during the three-part dialogue between Tillich and Hisamatsu, it is the apparently technical issue of the *particular* that forms the surprising culminating point and links all other points to the question of the Ultimate's nature. After repeated, unfruitful attempts to reach a conclusion, the question comes up a last time in the third dialogue, at which point Tillich has a memorable *cris du coeur*. He expresses his inability

to comprehend, much less agree: “Dr. Hisamatsu seems, then, to be at a point that has nothing to do with sin or guilt. On this issue *of the particular* there is apparently a profound difference between us. What I would like to comprehend is how his position is even possible (*Dialogues*, p. 149)”.

The problem arises when Hisamatsu speaks of the transition from the world of everyday reality, where each particular individual finds itself in opposition of some sort with other items, to the world of Enlightenment, where there is no such opposition. We need to remember that, for Hisamatsu, it is the *concept* of being that necessarily implies non-being (*Dialogues*, p. 116).” It is the analytical approach that, so to speak, creates dual opposition where there is none. For Tillich, the disappearance of the duality implies the disappearance of the particular self, which Hisamatsu strenuously denies – to no avail. When Tillich objects that, transcendent and timeless as it may be, Enlightenment happens at a moment in time and space, and that it happens to a particular individual, e.g., Hisamatsu, and not to Hitler or a shoemaker, De Martino’s predictable response is that “considered from the perspective of time-and-space, the Awakening may seem to take place in time-and-space. But considered from the perspective of the Awakening-in-itself, it is neither conditioned nor restricted by either time or space” (*Dialogues*, p. 126). To which Tillich responds: “Then it cannot happen to a human being.”

I. THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

Tillich, who is used to think in terms of universals and particulars, sees this as the disappearance of the particular, “swallowed” by the Formless Self. In his third Bampton lecture, held a few years later, Tillich ends along the same lines: “*Only* if each person has a substance of his own is community possible, for community presupposes separation. You, Buddhist friends, have identity, but not community (Tillich, 1963, p. 75).” Whether Tillich is right in this evaluation or not, it is certainly on this point that he has the greatest difficulties grasping Hisamatsu’s thought. When Hisamatsu indicates that, for the Formless Self, the flower and the one who sees the flower are one and the same, Tillich dismisses the statement as a paradoxical “way of speaking.” From his comment in the Bampton lectures, as few years later, it appears that he came to take the Zen position more seriously, while still seeing it as problematic. That position will now be examined.

II. NON-OBSTRUCTION BETWEEN PARTICULAR AND PARTICULAR

Hisamatsu explains that, far from removing the identity of the particular, the Awakening to the Formless Self gives particulars their true reality: “Ordinary individuals are unfulfilled, isolated, or disintegrated, and cannot be regarded as ‘authentic individuals.’ Authentic individuals as understood in Zen Buddhism may be explained in the ... concept of *jiji-muge* [事事無礙] (the non-obstruction between particular and particular) ... or *koko-enjo* [箇箇円成] (each individual fulfilled)” (*Dialogues*, p. 143). “Non-obstruction between particular and particular” means that, for the Formless Self, things are immediately apprehended in their “Suchness” (as what they are), and not through the medium of conceptualization that inevitably makes distinctions and separates. By dropping the analytic-dualistic approach, one does not deny the individuality of the particular, rather one affirms it, but with the immediacy of the experience of oneness or identity between the particulars.

“Non-obstruction” is a good reminder of the nothingness or emptiness found in the Formless Self, in spite of its repeatedly emphasized affirmative nature of that Self. Precisely speaking, it shows the affirmative or positive nature of that very emptiness, in that emptiness allows for full freedom – it does not stand in the way, hence, “non obstruction.” But it is not a physical emptiness, one that would merely allow for something to be put somewhere, like an empty room that is free for new furniture. It is an emptiness of the Self that is no longer obstructed by dualistic thinking and ordinary perception. That emptiness allows the already existing reality to be its true Self. In it, the Self is unfettered and gains genuine access to things as they are.

Something is grasped about reality that the Western tradition has a hard time to process, because that tradition is very much entrenched in the rational-analytical dualistic way of thinking. Nishitani observes:

Kant looks on things from the very outset as *objects*; or, to put it the other way around, his standpoint is that of *representation*. In this theoretical philosophy, an objective, representational point of view is presupposed as a constant base. The problem of the thing-in-itself developed, in fact, from the presupposition of such a base (Nishitani, 1982, p.133).

Needless to say, the observation is not only aimed at Kant – after all he tried to solve the problem – but also at those who preceded and followed him. With the development of his critical-intuitive or metalogical method,

Tillich makes a particularly ambitious attempt to overcome this very problem without sacrificing either rational thinking or the immediacy of experience. He also offers an explicit critique of Kant (notably in the first ten hours of his 1920 course in Berlin), in spite of his great appreciation for the Kantian revolution, and his words sound strangely familiar to the reader of Nishitani.

But his criticism also reveals the whole difference between his outlook and that of Zen. Tillich criticizes Kant for his use of the thing-in-itself, saying that with it Kant reintroduces an objectification of the Ultimate. Even though Kant insists that nothing can be said about the thing-in-itself, the very fact of introducing this terminology implies a wholly rational starting point – on this, Tillich and Nishitani would agree²⁴. However, Tillich's critique is aimed at Kant's *mode* of approaching the question of the unconditioned element that must be "behind" phenomena. Tillich, far from denying that unconditional element, makes it his early code word for God, *das Unbedingte*, borrowed straight from Kant. Tillich's challenge to Kant is that the Unconditioned can only be grasped when the critical function of the mind is combined with *intuition*. The issue thus is the relationship to the Unconditioned.

For Zen, and this is Nishitani's entire point, the question of the thing-in-itself does not even arise, because, to the awakened one, there is no thing (object) vs. self (subject), as both are experienced as immediately one.

D. Final Assessment

1. THE ONTOLOGICAL BOTTOM LINE

Communion and identity: The conclusion of the discussion on the ultimate is thus not unexpected. On one side, there is the challenge of *communion* (between the Ultimate and the self, and among selves); on the other side that of *identity* (between the Ultimate or Formless Self and each self). For Tillich, the Ultimate inevitably takes the place of object in the cognitive process, though it is beyond subject and object. The Western quest for an intellectual grasp of the Ultimate is destined to fail because of this fundamental paradox.

²⁴ In his 1920 Lecture (p. 507), Tillich states that even the high point of European mysticism (Plotinus) remains too much linked to form. The West, he says "makes a system even out of mysticism." This is not the case in India, where the *Gebalt* is grasped as what is essential to the point that form no longer plays a role. Western mysticism is "the result of a rational history of philosophy. The mystical principle is the last abstraction of the knowledge of the world going beyond itself."

However, the Ultimate remains the Ultimate – infinite and unconditioned – and distinct from the finite self. A non-objectified, non-existing God is, therefore, nevertheless an absolute God for Tillich. To have a paradoxical relationship, you need a relationship, and to have a relationship, you need two: the Ultimate and the Self. Tillich rejects Buddhism’s “a = non-a” just as he rejects Hegel’s panlogic equivalent of “being = non-being”.

In one word, Tillich stands squarely within the Western tradition made of an uneasy but tremendously successful blend between Judeo-Christian theism and dualistic Greek philosophy. In 1920, Tillich compares the statement that $a = a$ with the statement that $a = b$. The first, for him, amounts to certain but dead identity. The second is less safe and less certain, but it means development and life. The highest mystical speculation, he says, always reaches $a = a$, but as soon as this happens, “all life is destroyed” (*ist alles Leben vernichtet*; Tillich, 2000, pp. 394-395). Tillich reemphasizes this point in his encounter with Hisamatsu (*Dialogues*, p. 115-116) when he states that “pure being would be death.” How the lifeless $a = a$ leads to $a = b$ is beyond the grasp of reason, it is the mystery of creation.

Next, even though Tillich makes the unusual step to accept that there is potential evil even in the Ultimate, God, for him that evil is only potential. Tillich’s position here is very untraditional for a Christian theologian and comes as a great surprise to Hisamatsu. In the end, though, it remains unacceptable for him, because Tillich insists on the potential nature of that evil in God (whose choice is not to actualize it) and because he stresses that evil is a derivative distortion of goodness, rather than its inevitable counterpart (*Dialogues*, p. 116 ff.). The mere existence of evil and untruth next to goodness and truth does not have the same devastating consequences for Tillich as it does for Zen. God remains as a safe haven of absolute goodness and absolute truth, even though the process of becoming one with that Ultimate can never be completed in this finite world (Tillich speaks of *anticipation*, an expression that of course elicits a negative response from Hisamatsu).

Ground of Being: If Tillich makes it clear that a particular Self claiming ultimacy – and not just participation in the ultimate – is unacceptable, Hisamatsu makes it equally clear that the notion of a ground of being, or whatever other expression is used to replace the classic notion of causal Being or Creator, is unacceptable to his Zen philosophy, because it leads back to dualism.

Hisamatsu introduces Eckhart's notions of *Abgeschiedenheit* (which Tillich translates as separateness) and links it to the Zen notion of *detachment*. He also brings up Eckhart's expression of *Urgrund* (ultimate ground)²⁵ and "divine abyss" (*Abgrund*) that Tillich likes to borrow from the medieval mystics and from Schelling (*Dialogues*, p. 83 ff). But he stresses that if *Urgrund* means a divine abyss (*Abgrund*) from which all things with a finite form emerge, that still leaves duality. For Zen, the *Urgrund* should be the Self. Thus, even the most Zen-like Christian mystic is suspected to diverge from Zen on the most essential point of all²⁶. The ultimacy of the Formless Self is so essential to Hisamatsu, because with it all potential for tension and paradox disappears for good.

The wholly other: neither tremendum nor fascinans – or even mysterios: If we now turn to Otto's contention (shared by Tillich) that the non-being of Buddhism is a mere formulation of the "wholly other" and thus corresponds to being on an experiential level, the limits of that astute observation appear at once. In Zen, nothingness may indeed transcend both regular being and non-being and amount to a Great Affirmation, but it is one that is neither *tremendum* nor *fascinans* nor even a *mysterium* – quite the contrary. The Enlightenment of *śūnyatā* removes any sense of mystery, since it means direct contact with the Self. It removes the fear and insecurity created by dual opposition, and it leaves no room for desire or fascination. Nothing perhaps better shows how the basic attitudes of Buddhism and theism hint at a very different experience of *Gebalt*. What that *Gebalt* actually is lies beyond our considerations.

Art: This quiet, but pervasive ontological difference underlying the whole exchange between Tillich and Hisamatsu even appears in the discussion on art. Both use the term *expressionism* to describe what they consider the highest form of art. Tillich has in mind early 20th century German expressionism and its often brutal expression of the struggle of life (he also mentions Picasso's

²⁵ Though "ultimate ground" is probably the best possible translation, it does not do full justice to the emotional weight of any German expression starting with "Ur-", signifying something deeply original and ancient – as far back as one can go, but not just in a spatio-temporal sense. Kant uses *Grund*, the grounding of things, as opposed to their cause, to avoid contradicting his own conclusion that nothing can be known of causes as they are in themselves.

²⁶ Nishitani's evaluation of Eckhart is much more positive and makes him practically into an adept of Zen. Not only the Self, but also God reaches absolute nothingness before being reborn together in the soul of man (like Tillich, Nishitani refers to Eckhart's "God beyond God"). The soul is not in communion or union with God, it is one with him.

Guernica, which Hisamatsu particularly dislikes for its “noisy” nature). By expressionism, Hisamatsu means Zen art and its capacity to evoke detachment and profound quietude. Even Paul Klee’s painting of a fish surrounded by semi-abstract motives only elicits partial approval from Hisamatsu who still finds the dark setting of the painting scary. Zen art does make use of darkness, but it is a quiet, peaceful darkness, not a threatening one²⁷.

2) Mutual attraction: Zen’s longing for the West and Tillich’s nostalgia for Far Eastern peace

Kant is famous for reducing the entire philosophical undertaking to three questions: what is, what should be, and what one can hope for. After discussing the first two from the respective perspectives of Tillich and Zen, it might be good to give a thought to the third question.

Hisamatsu well represents a longing that is common to much of contemporary Japanese philosophy, notably his colleagues of the Kyoto School. This particular longing is not an existential one. It is a fascination with the success of Western philosophy, especially 19th century dialectic and 20th century existentialism, in formulating the existential distress of modern life. In spite of their critical evaluation of that Western thought, thinkers like Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani, Daisetz Suzuki, and Shin’ichi Hisamatsu were not only desirous to spread the practice of Zen beyond the shores of Japan. They were also attracted by the West. They had been intellectually trained in Western thought, particularly German philosophy (Nishitani, for instance, has been a student of Heidegger). Therefore, in their writings, one can easily detect an effort to use the Hegelian and existentialist “newspeak” in formulating their own religious philosophy.

We find a case in point in Masao Abe’s attempt to show the dialectical character of *śūnyatā*.

This dialectical structure of Sunyata may be logically explained as follows: since Sunyata is realized not only by negating the ‘eternalist’ view but also by negating the ‘nihilistic’ view, which negates the former, it is not based on a mere negation but on the negation of negation. This double negation is

²⁷ The German language, interestingly, uses *Dunkelheit* to express a positive, peaceful darkness, and *Finsternis* to express a scary type of darkness, a distinction that comes very close to that between the two types of darkness introduced by Hisamatsu.

not a relative negation but an absolute negation. And an absolute negation is nothing but an absolute affirmation. Thus we may say that absolute negation is absolute affirmation and absolute affirmation is absolute negation. This paradoxical statement well expresses the dialectical and dynamic structure of Sunyata in which emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness (Ryu, 1985, p. 162).

This obvious reference to the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic and the effort to squeeze Zen into its parameters is a good example of what was just said. But though it offers an interesting new perspective, it will nevertheless leave many readers unsatisfied²⁸. Given the very self-understanding of Zen, some would probably consider the attempted synthesis to be against nature.

Tillich's own interest in Zen is fairly easy to explain. Though Tillich's nature and orientation are far remote from the dispassionate stance of Buddhism and more particularly Zen, it is no surprise that this religious tradition captured his attention. First, even though Buddhism plays a modest role in Tillich's early philosophy of religion, what he says about it is revealing of a profound fascination because Buddhism makes it its central aim to avoid any objectification of the divine. In Buddhism, says Tillich, "forms are there in order to be overcome (*"... die gesamte Welt der Formen dazu da ist, überwindern zu werden"*; Tillich, 2000, p. 556)." That makes Buddhism an objective ally of Tillich's philosophy of religion. But, more than that, Buddhism promises what has eluded Tillich throughout his life, internal peace. The very beginning of the three dialogues consists of an exchange where Tillich expresses his sense of a need for what amounts to Zen's objectless concentration, because the faculty to focus his mind on a specific goal in the midst of modern-day brouhaha, useful as it is, no longer satisfies him on a deeper level.

Tillich was a passionate man and, as such, he suffered the pain of his passions. The wish to find the peace that accompanies the dispassionate stance of Zen – without abandoning his passion altogether – finally led him to ask the somewhat puzzling question: what about being *freely attached*? (*Dialogues*, p. 136). Hisamatsu's reply is of course that freedom comes with

²⁸ In the Hegelian dialectic, the affirmation is negated, after which the negation itself is negated. This negation of the negation amounts to an affirmation and leads to a dynamic movement through becoming. In Zen, both being and non-being are negated at the same time from a perspective that has nothing to do with either. Explaining the affirmative nature of nothingness by saying that it is negation of negation therefore seems far-fetched at best.

detachment and is incompatible with attachment. But Tillich's question was more than a *bon mot* or a sign of naivety. It clearly was a wish. The fact that both sides, in spite of their strong positions, felt themselves drawn to each other in such a way is a sign more powerful than any ontological analysis that an interface was (and still is) waiting to be explored for mutual enrichment.

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