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Yusa/Zen & Philosophy

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Introduction

Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) defined for the Japanese what it means to philosophize. His thought was crowned with his name and came to be known as *Nishida tetsugaku*, or “Nishidan philosophy,” and enjoyed high regard among his peers for its rigor and originality. His endeavors helped shape a major stream of philosophical discourse, known as the Kyoto school, which sought to go beyond merely adapting Western philosophy. His conviction of the universal validity, inherent rationality, and beauty of Japanese culture compelled him to give it a philosophical expression. Even during his lifetime, he was hailed as the representative thinker of Japan and became a cultural icon as well as a source of national pride.

Colleagues of Nishida’s who were studying abroad in the 1920s and 1930s brought his thought to the attention of leading European thinkers such as Edmund Husserl and Heinrich Rickert. Nishida corresponded with the two German philosophers as well. In the late 1930s several of Nishida’s essays were translated into German, but before fruitful exchanges could be undertaken, World War II erupted, and whatever discourse had been built up was buried.

More than half a century after his death, a healthy interest in Nishidan philosophy and the Kyoto school of philosophy exists among the contemporary generation of thinkers and scholars worldwide. A good number of Nishida’s philosophical essays have been translated into English, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Chinese, and Korean—and the list continues to grow. Where does this “Nishidan mystique” originate?

Given the interest that Nishidan philosophy has enjoyed in Japan and elsewhere, it is curious to observe that in the late 1930s his thought was considered pro-Western and counter to the “Japanese spirit”; his

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physical safety was even threatened by ultranationalists. Following World War II, however, Nishidan philosophy came to be regarded as the expression of prewar “old” Japan, and thus as outmoded. Marxist and progressive thinkers even condemned it as imperialistic and nationalistic by employing the tactic of guilt by association. It was widely felt in the wake of Japan’s defeat that the country had to enter a new period and that any ties with the past had to be severed.¹ In this hasty and somewhat forced cultural paradigm shift, leading Japanese intellectuals threw out the baby with the bath water.²

Worldwide intellectual movements after World War II attempted to deny the legacies of pre-1945 totalitarianism and ultranationalism. Martin Heidegger, for example, was targeted, and the trend did not spare Nishida from the list of the “suspicious.” Nishida was branded a kind of fascist or ultranationalist, “blind” to the “demonic aspect of nationalism and imperialism.” He became a convenient scapegoat for those who were inclined to look for immediate answers rather than carry out the detailed historical analyses of the times leading up to 1945 and beyond.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, it was fashionable—not just in Japan but worldwide—to embrace Marxist views if one wanted to be seen as socially engaged and intellectually conscientious. Even earlier, during the 1930s in Japan, it was held that to be an intellectual, one must be a Marxist. Although Nishida was open to such aspects of Marxism as the importance of society and action, he kept to his own path.

I offer in these pages an intellectual biography that describes Nishida’s philosophical odyssey in the context of his life and that visits him in his time. This biography depicts the social-cultural-political environment in which he lived, for no thinker thinks in a vacuum. Although I hope to dispel various misconceptions about Nishida, my ultimate purpose is to make Nishida’s thought more accessible to the reader by tracing its development in the concrete context of his life.

MEIJI: A UNIQUE HISTORICAL JUNCTURE

Nishida, born in 1870 (the third year of the Meiji period), grew up during a time when Western (i.e., European and North American) ideas, natural sciences, and technology were changing the traditional Japanese way of life. This dynamic historical period in which East and West came face-to-face, and sometimes collided, on an unprecedented

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scale stimulated creative minds. The Meiji era was a period of great intellectual activity in Japan. Internationally, Japan awoke to the expansionism of European and North American powers. Domestically, the country was undergoing changes in the political, educational, economic, technological, scientific, cultural, and religious spheres as it faced, adopted, and adapted Western models. Apart from promoting heavy industry and building up military force, the government also attempted to implement a nationalist faith by manipulating the symbols of Shinto.³ Nishida and his friends remained critical of many changes brought about by the government's decisions.

In his youth, Nishida, like other well-educated young men of his time, was thoroughly trained in classical Chinese. This training added depth to his intellectual world, just as Westerners who are trained in Latin and Greek bring depth to their worlds. Nishida, like many of his generation, was an idealistic humanist and pushed the horizon of his world beyond the tiny archipelago of Japan. Together with his friends, he was walking an uncharted terrain, his eyes bright with curiosity.

Nishida took up philosophy because he wanted to understand the workings of the universe. A few generations earlier, Japanese intellectuals advocated "adopting the Western sciences and technology while preserving the Japanese spirit," an eclectic strategy commonly known as "Japanese in spirit, Western in technology" (*wakon yōsai*).⁴ By the time Nishida came on the stage, Japanese intellectuals were sophisticated enough to see Western tradition as a whole; they saw not only technology but also art, philosophy, and the discoveries of the natural sciences as the integral self-expression of Western civilization. To young Nishida the discipline of philosophy seemed to offer unknown promises and challenges. The clash of two fundamentally different cultures, East and West, was for him an occasion to reflect on such questions as the relationship between cognition and volition, between tradition and globalization, and the nature of history and science. He carried out his venture on his own terms and created his own system of thought. For Nishida the tension between East and West turned out to be a creative one.

ZEN AND PHILOSOPHY

The coming together of Zen Buddhism and philosophy, or Oriental *prajñā* and Western *sophia*, may constitute for some the essence of the "Nishidan mystique." Beginning in his midtwenties, Nishida under-

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went a formal Zen practice, which was by no means a smooth path for him. Unlike those who are mentally ready to break through the “Zen barrier,” Nishida had to struggle because of his strong intellectuality and deep-rooted ego. Once liberated from things that hampered his spiritual growth, he discovered a new vantage point, both as a scholar and a man. The curious thing about Nishida’s Zen practice is that even after he quit regular *zazen* (practice of sitting meditation) and *sanzen* (private interviews with a Zen master, geared toward fostering spiritual awakening), the “Zen seed” that was securely planted in him continued to grow and bring about sudden surprises at unexpected times. Because of this ongoing fermentation, Nishida became convinced that the fundamental mission of his philosophical activities was to bridge the gap between natural sciences and Zen teaching; this he confided to Mutai Risaku two years before his death.⁵

Zen opened up Nishida’s mind to the vital question of his own spirituality. The practice of *kōan*—a kind of “Zen homework” designed to release the mind from the conventional opposition between subject and object—shattered his arid intellectual desire for secular fame and success and opened up a new intellectual horizon that drew its authenticity from life itself. Zen rendered his thinking flexible. He came to appreciate the import of everyday life, which he realized was the very source of his scholarly pursuits; indeed, life took precedence over his scholarly success. In his search to fulfill his spiritual destiny, he drew on a wide range of spiritual traditions, avidly reading not only Eastern thinkers but also Christian thinkers, theologians, and mystics, such as Augustine, Nicholas of Cusa, and Meister Eckhart.

Although Nishida was by nature a man of independent mind, Zen practice further fortified that spirit in him. He had many students who wished to study with him and to establish close teacher-disciple (*deshi*) relationships with him. “Not to refuse those who come to him and not to chase after those who leave him” (*kurumono wa kobamazu, sarumono wa owazu*) was Nishida’s usual response. Nishitani Keiji, one of his “disciples,” recalls that Nishida “aimed to inspire an independent spirit in his students so that they might go their own ways and not be fettered to their teacher’s ideas. One hears frequently of Nishida’s broad-mindedness in allowing his disciples to pursue their own courses of study.”⁶ Nishida, though considered a key figure in the establishment of the Kyoto school of philosophy, contributed to it primarily by granting his students intellectual freedom. A case in point is Tanabe

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Hajime, whose declaration of independence from Nishida became the driving force behind the formation of the Kyoto school. This fact underscores that Nishida not only allowed his students to proceed in their own directions but also actually preferred that they do so. He welcomed constructive criticism of this thought from his peers and students.

Zen clearly made its mark on the content, system, and style of Nishida's thought. Nishitani Keiji, himself a profoundly enlightened Zen practitioner, observed that, through Zen, Nishida's otherwise untamed life force became his finely honed will, and through this will he purified himself. This process culminated in a union between his self and the law of the universe⁷ that shaped his philosophical stance. Nishida's approach was essentially empirical. He turned his attention to the naked reality of experience itself. This empirical approach is in line with Zen teaching, which pays close attention to the here and now, to the living experience itself, before it hardens into concepts and bifurcates into subject (experiencer) and object (the experienced). Nishida acquired this knowledge of the unity of subject and object through his *zazen* meditation, which is a body-mind engagement. He came to maintain that "the separation and independence of subject and object is but an arbitrary dogma ingrained in our habit of thinking."⁸ This subject-object unity was self-evident to Nishida and remained for him the fundamental epistemological conviction.

Nishida's vantage point—of the self "free of ego" (*muga*), or selflessness, which, by definition is free of attachment to a certain dogmatic viewpoint—enabled him to evolve his philosophical vision from that of "pure experience," to "self-consciousness," to "the *topos* (or field)," to "the absolutely contradictorily self-identical dialectical world of the one and the many." The mental-spiritual freedom of the "original self" allowed his philosophical reflections to deepen. In this sense he was an open-ended thinker.

PHILOSOPHY BEYOND ZEN

Zen was for Nishida the fountainhead and unifying force of his philosophical vision. But he realized early on in his career that it was best not to mention his Zen background, for this public knowledge had given rise to a school of interpretation that reduced his thought into a philosophy of "satori" that only a few select enlightened people could

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hope to understand. Many years later Nishida explained this interest to Nishitani Keiji:

You are absolutely right to say that something of Zen is in the background of my thought. I am not an expert on Zen, but I do believe that people generally misunderstand what Zen is all about. I think the life of Zen consists in “getting at reality.” It has been my dearest wish since my thirties to unite Zen and philosophy, even though that is impossible. Certainly, it is fine if *you* say [that Zen elements are present in my thought], but if ordinary uninformed people call my thought “Zen,” I would strongly object, because they do not understand either Zen or my thought. They simply bundle together X and Y as the same thing, which is to misunderstand both my thought and Zen.⁹

Indeed, what distinguishes Nishida’s achievement from that of his contemporaries is not his Zen practice but the serious engagement with Western thinkers, both contemporary and past, that honed his thinking. Several years of philosophical apprenticeship began about 1910. During this time he assiduously read and studied the works and methods of Western thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Bergson, the neo-Kantian thinkers, and Husserl. This apprenticeship gave Nishida’s thought strength and toned his philosophical muscles. Agreeing with Daisetz T. Suzuki that some knowledge of Zen might be necessary to understand Nishida, Thomas Merton has pointed out that “some knowledge of existential phenomenology may serve as a preparation” as well.¹⁰ Merton interpreted Nishida in the light of his own thorough training in Western philosophical and theological traditions. Merton’s comment would have come as a personal compliment to Nishida, whose attempt was to engage in a philosophical discourse proper and not to create some eclectic blend of ideas. Nishida vigorously carried out his philosophical inquiries, which extended to the fields of modern mathematics, theoretical physics, and biology.

BIOGRAPHY AND PHILOSOPHERS

Nishida contended that a philosopher’s thought should stand on its own, and that therefore a philosopher’s private life had little to do with his or her thought.¹¹ This remark may reveal his dislike of an overtly personal display of emotions and circumstances. Nevertheless, Nishida enjoyed reading autobiographies and biographies of all sorts of men and women, philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, and educators,

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not only famous heroic figures but also little-known private individuals. In his teens Nishida immersed himself in the biographies of mathematicians, such as Laplace and Lagrange,¹² and he was inspired by the autobiography of Niiijima Jō, the founder of Dōshisha in Kyoto. He especially devoured biographies when he was a dormitory master for a year (1901–1902) at the Fourth Higher School. He took notes on what touched him and spoke to the students at their weekly evening meetings about what he had just read. His notes contain such figures as Thomas Carlyle, Mary Lyon (a teacher at Mt. Holyoke Seminary), George Peabody (a philanthropist), John Bunyan, General Charles “Chinese” Gordon, and Yamaoka Tesshū.¹³ It was in fact the autobiography of Herbert Spencer that gave Nishida the encouragement he needed to proceed in philosophy.¹⁴ He must have read biographies of Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, because he later recommended them to his younger colleague Tanabe Hajime.¹⁵

In 1922, upon receiving a copy of the autobiography of Bernard Bolzano from Miki Kiyoshi in Germany, Nishida enthusiastically introduced it to Japanese students of philosophy.¹⁶ Years later still, Nishida enjoyed a biography of N. H. Abel, a Swedish mathematician,¹⁷ and in the middle of World War II he was enthralled by Zsolt de Harsanyi’s life of Galileo Galilei, *The Star-Gazer*.¹⁸

Suzuki Daisetz, his lifelong friend, makes a case for a biographical work on Nishida:

It can be argued that one can grasp Nishida’s thought simply by reading his philosophical essays. But there is much that was not expressed in words. . . . His writings are not the whole of Nishida. Unless one meets the person and spends some time with that person, one cannot grasp the “human” behind that person’s thought. I believe that without knowing Nishida the person, we cannot fully grasp his thought.¹⁹

Suzuki depicts Nishida as someone who would initially give the people the impression of aloofness but who was actually a man of deep emotions that he concealed well. Suzuki contended that however much Nishida might have willed to engage in philosophy, no great thought would have emerged if not for these emotions.²⁰ We recall Fichte’s adage that there is an organic unity between the kind of philosophy a person chooses and the kind of person she or he is, because “a philosophical system is not a piece of dead furniture one can acquire and discard at will; it is animated with the spirit of the person who possesses it.”²¹

PRIVACY OR HISTORICAL PROPERTY?

After Nishida's death, his disciples and colleagues decided to compile his collected works. Under the leadership of Shimomura Toratarō, an editorial team was formed, comprised of Mutai Risaku, Kōsaka Masaki, Yamanouchi Tokuryū, Watsuji Tetsurō, Amano Teiyū, and Abe Yoshishige. The team was assisted by Nagai Hiroshi, a junior colleague of Shimomura, and began publishing *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* [Collected works of Nishida Kitarō]. One of the issues the editorial team confronted was whether to include Nishida's diary, which spanned almost half a century, from 1897 to 1945, and about 4,000 letters collected by the editors.²² They had to reckon with Nishida's opinion that a philosopher's work has little or no connection with his private life. After deliberation, however, they reached a consensus: they would publish both his diary and the main bulk of his letters. There were ample Western precedents for this—and Nishida had become a historical figure. The team also felt that if his letters were to be published, they should be in charge of such a project, for they had known the professor personally and could read his handwriting.²³ Scholars of Nishidan philosophy today are greatly indebted to the team's decision. Nishida's diary and letters are indispensable sources for tracing his development as a thinker and a person.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I first encountered Nishida through his essay "Basho" in the spring of 1975, when I was a graduate student at the University of California at Santa Barbara. I was assigned to make a presentation on his thought in a seminar led by Professor R. Panikkar, and I have been under the spell of the "Nishidan mystique" ever since.

In the early summer of 1991, when I was doing research in Kyoto, I visited Nishida's grave at Reiu'in, a temple in the Myōshinji compound. With no introduction in hand, I rang a bell and waited for someone to respond. A young monk opened the gate and ushered me into the foyer of the main building. Soon, someone who appeared to be the head priest of the temple came out and received me. I introduced myself and said, "May I see Nishida's grave?" Thereupon the priest became irate and shouted at me: "What do you mean by 'see'? A grave is not an item on display. Did you bring flowers and incense to offer to him?" At that very moment, I realized that my attitude

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toward Nishida had been one of a researcher and not of a sensitive, thoughtful human being. Meanwhile, the priest disappeared without another word.

Left alone, and by then with a few tears welling up, I was about to leave the temple. As I walked out of the entrance hall, I saw the novice who had opened the gate running across the garden with a pail of water and two stalks of white lilies. Then the head priest emerged and said, "Why hurry?" He showed me into the corner of the garden where Nishida's gravestone lies, arranged the flowers in the flower stands on both sides of the gravestone, offered some incense, and began to chant the *Heart Sutra*. After he had finished this formal offering, he urged me to pray at the grave. Needless to say, I was overwhelmed by his kindness.

Afterward, he invited me into the temple and served me a bowl of green tea. Our conversation became lively. He told me that Nishida's gravesite was chosen right below the bell tower so that his spirit could hear the sound of the bell at five o'clock every evening. The priest was clearly devoted to Nishida and took great care of the grave. This small incident became a poignant reminder for me. Just as Nishida discovered the place of scholarship within the larger context of life, so must scholars be mindful not to divorce scholarship from the heart or from a humble respect for life. I cannot help but feel that because Nishida's life reminds us of this, he continues to live on and teaches those who approach him.