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Writing a History of Japanese philosophy
What I Have Learned

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For the past several years, I have been writing a book-length history of Japanese philosophy and, in doing so, I have come to understand features of the tradition in a way differently from how I had previously. I do not know whether these are insights valuable to others or merely corrections to my own initial naïve assumptions. For this paper, I will merely share those ideas and readers can decide for themselves whether there is anything important or innovative in them.

I will broadly address three issues. (1) How can one explain to a Westerner the basic patterns of Japanese philosophizing, especially when those patterns are rare in the present-day Western philosophical scene? (2) What themes or motifs emerged in Japanese philosophy in response to the *Zeitgeist* of each historical period? (3) Is there something Japanese philosophy can contribute to world philosophy today?

Explaining Japanese Philosophy to Westerners

In teaching and writing about Japanese philosophy for over three decades, I have sometimes been discouraged by readers or students who just could not seem to "get it." They might know which philosopher said what on which occasion or they might be able to define individual Japanese philosophical terms, but too often the enterprise as a whole did not make sense to them. This only reinforced preju-

dices that Japanese thought is, as D. T. Suzuki liked to claim, not rational, but aesthetic or mystical. This left many Western philosophers convinced there was nothing of interest for them in studying Japanese thought. That response was disappointing and I wanted to find a better approach in my explanations.

Experimenting in public lectures and in the classroom, I discoverd that a good technique was to put my audience into a different frame of mind, a different way of asking questions, *before* I told them anything about Japanese philosophy itself. If my audiences would stop asking their Western-biased questions of Japanese philosophers, they might learn what kinds of questions the Japanese thinkers themselves asked. Then they could appreciate Japanese answers as being as provocative, rational, and systematic as philosophical answers in the West. As I liked to say, it is not that Japanese typically think differently from most Westerners, but that Japanese commonly think about different things. Depending on differences in what you are asking about, it is hardly surprising that different rhetorics, forms of analysis, forms of persuasion, and types of argument would develop over the centuries. In response, I developed a way of reorienting the philosophical assumptions and paradigms of the audience. I argued for the rationale behind my approach in my book, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (2002). Originally delivered as the Gilbert Ryle Lectures to an audience of Western philosophers, the book distinguished two kinds of philosophizing, what I call philosophizing in the "intimacy" and the "integrity" orientations.

My claim is that the integrity orientation of philosophy has been especially prominent in the West since the early modern period (Descartes) and it became dominant by the time of the Enlightenment. I do not claim, of course, that the integrity orientation has been supreme throughout the Western tradition. Indeed, the other orientation—that of "intimacy"—can be found in some early Greek thought, in much of the medieval period, in process philosophy and pragmatism of various sorts, and in some contemporary Western feminist and postmodernist theories. Only toward the end of the book did I emphasize that the intimacy orientation has been domi-

nant through most of the history of Japanese philosophy. The evidence for that claim, I promised, would be in my forthcoming history of Japanese philosophy.

In *Intimacy or Integrity,* I gave five characteristics that distinguish philosophizing in an integrity and an intimacy orientation. For our purposes here, I will mention just two. The first is that an integrity orientation favors explanation and analysis as based in external relations. That is, if I say "*a* and *b* are related," integrity assumes that *a* and *b* can exist independently (each with its own integrity), but since there is a relation between them, some third factor *R* bridges or connects the two. By contrast, an intimacy orientation favors an explanation in terms of internal or inherent relations. That is, if I say "*a* and *b* are related," intimacy assumes that *a* and *b* are interlinked or overlap, and that the *R* is the shared part of *a* and *b*. This subtle difference profoundly influences how philosophy in each orientation proceeds. For example, in integrity, to understand the relation between knower and known, one looks for something else to connect them (such as the words or concepts of "knowledge"). In intimacy, however, to understand the relation between knower and known, one looks for something they share. Knowledge is in the intersection between knower and known. Using diagrams, we can represent the difference like this, showing the relevance to various philosophical fields:

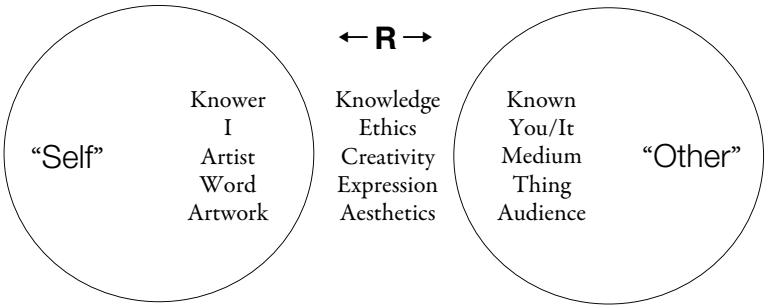

Figure 1: Philosophy in the Orientation of Integrity

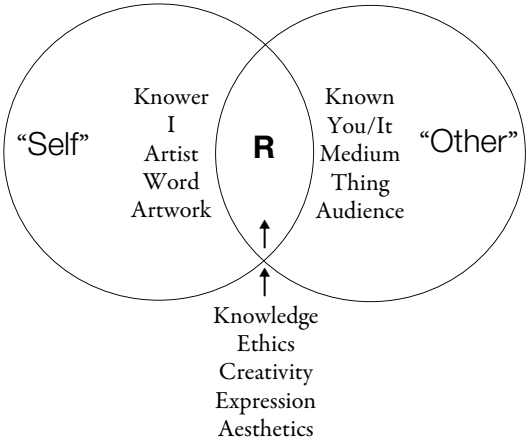

Figure 2: Philosophy in the Orientation of Intimacy

The contrast is clear when, for instance, a modern Western analytic philosopher and a typical Japanese philosopher try to develop an epistemological, ethical, or aesthetic theory to address some philosophical issue. When they do so, they tend to look for their answer in a different way, indeed in a different "place" or "field" (*basho*場所, as Nishida Kitarō called it). Because of that difference, what counts as a suitable answer in each tradition is different.

The second difference between the intimacy and integrity orientations that I will make here involves the role of the somatic. In the integrity orientation, the body and mind are externally related to each other and distinct, each having its own integrity. Among other things, this leads to the view that knowledge is mental and emotions are somatic. For intimacy, by contrast, the mind and body intersect and overlap rather than exist separately. Consequently, in Japan the *kokoro* is necessarily both cognitive and affective and even the common word *omou*思う involves feeling as well as thinking. A corollary of this intimate relation between mind and body is that in the Japanese tradition, to learn or achieve insight requires psychosomatic discipline.

One can never know deeply without a bodymind praxis. To explain this difference to my students, I ask them who better knows the nature of clay, the geologist or the potter. The answer, of course, depends on what "knowing" means and how it is attained. The geologist uses detached, scientific observation; the potter learns by imitating the praxis of the teacher in a "hands-on" form of knowing. So, when a geologist and a potter each say they "know the nature of clay," despite the similarity in their comment, they actually mean something quite different.

In writing a history of Japanese philosophy for Westerners, therefore, I think it best to orient the reader to intimacy at the outset. When Japanese philosophers—whether it be Kūkai in the ninth century or Nishida in the twentieth—investigate the meaning of knowledge or wisdom, they are looking for knowledge in the intimacy orientation's sense of the word. Unless the reader of Japanese philosophy understands that basic point, the study of Japanese philosophy will always be exotic and not philosophically provocative.

Philosophical Themes in Different Japanese Eras

As a human and social construction, philosophy always reflects not only its cultural home, but also the *Zeitgeist* of its particular time and place. Therefore, a challenge in writing a history of Japanese philosophy is finding the specific character of philosophizing in any given era. To give a sampling of how I have done this, I will make a few comments about different periods of Japanese philosophy as I see them.

The first question for any history of philosophy, of course, is where to begin. The Institute for Religion and Culture at Nanzan University is assembling a sourcebook of readings in Japanese philosophy, a project in which I am a co-editor. When we began to outline that book, we invited about a dozen prominent European and American scholars of Japanese philosophy to a small workshop to share ideas about what the book might include. Right away, there arose the question of where to begin. Who was Japan's "first philoso-

pher?" At one point, Kūkai's name came up as a possible candidate for the honor. A French scholar responded that Kūkai's writings were not "philosophy" but only something like *pensée.* About ten minutes later, a German scholar argued the opposite side of the case, noting that Kūkai was certainly a philosopher because his works clearly qualify as *Denken.* We Americans were a bit amused since in English we often translate the French and German words the same: *thought* or *thinking.* This led us to the conclusion that we would never settle the issue if we had to start with some essentialist definition of philosophy and then decide how it applies to various Japanese thinkers

For my history, I decided that philosophy in Japan started with Shōtoku Taishi in the 7th century (or at least whoever wrote the texts attributed to him, especially the *Seventeen-article Constitution*). My justification is simple. Almost all histories of Western philosophy start with Thales. Yet, about all we know of Thales as a philosopher are his two statements: "all things are water" and "everything is full of spirits." Why, then, do almost all the Western histories designate him as the West's first philosopher? The reason is that Aristotle appointed him so when he wrote his own little survey of the history of philosophy up to his time (*Metaphysics* I:3) . Aristotle's justification was that Thales was the first thinker to ask "what everything is" and to give an answer based not in myth or religious tradition, but in observation and reason. Aristotle claims that "we philosophers" have been doing the same ever since. In a parallel fashion, I argue, the writer of the *Seventeen-article Constitution* inquired into which imported philosophy Japan should follow, Confucianism or Buddhism. Shōtoku's answer was that there should be harmony among differing philosophies, a way of giving each its due. Japanese philosophers have since then been doing the same—taking disparate ideas from different philosophical sources and finding a way to bring them into some harmony.

For the Japanese thinkers of the Heian period, there were two pressing problems. The first was how to integrate all the different points of view—Confucianism, Daoism, the various forms of Buddhism, as well as sundry indigenous ideas and values—into a

coherent system. Both Tendai and Shingon developed ways of handling this problem: the Tendai classification of teachings and writings (later departing from the Chinese scheme by including the esoteric as well as the exoteric) and the Shingon classification of the "ten mindsets" (*jujūshin*十住心). In classifying the mindsets, Kūkai made a fundamental distinction between the exoteric and esoteric ways of knowing, arguing for the superiority of the latter. (Within a century after Kūkai, Tendai came to the same conclusion.) Importantly, that distinction closely parallels the difference between integrity's and intimacy's modes of knowing. Esoteric knowing assumes an internal relation between knower and known. It cannot be achieved by the mind alone, but must be embodied in praxis (*sokushinjōbutsu*即身成仏). Further, if we examine the nine lower exoteric mindsets, we find that the more a tradition emphasized internal over external relations, the more highly Kūkai ranked it.

The second problem facing the Heian thinkers was how to understand the relation between part and whole. In response Kūkai expounded a holographic relation. Kūkai's system, consonant with the structure found in mandala practice as well as certain assumptions within animism and fetishism, insists that the whole is not merely made up of its parts, but also contained in every part. It is as if the DNA of the universe is found in each and every thing in the universe. This holographic view of relation—the whole (*holo-*) as inscribed (*-graph*) in each of its parts—became a major paradigm for later Japanese thought.

The political, religious, and social upheaval of the Kamakura period lent a feeling of despair to the *Zeitgeist*. The unusual series of natural disasters—earthquakes, typhoons, tsunamis, droughts, epidemics, and catastrophic urban conflagrations— only made the situation worse. Many people interpreted the times in terms of the Buddhist idea of *mappō*. Philosophically, we could say the late Heian and Kamakura periods were a time of fragmentation and de-centering. The comprehensive systems of Tendai and Shingon philosophy, the claim to religious authority by their centralized institutions, the concern for fathoming the workings of the cosmos, and the devotion to

the academic study of the Buddhist canon all fell into disrepute. Religious people focused not on complexity but simplicity, and not on universal truth but pragmatic or contextual truth. There are parallel's with today's postmodern mood. For example, postmodernism has called into question whether texts can have meaning in themselves independent of the perspective and assumptions of its readers. In a similar vein, Shinran and Dōgen (and to a lesser extent, Nichiren as well) developed radical re-readings of classical Chinese texts based on their own idiosyncratic insight, using their *yomikae* (読み替え) technique to deconstruct the orthodox meanings of the sacred writings.

Of praxis, postmodern thinkers today often reject the systematized, elitist, and authoritarian disciplines of traditional institutions in favor of more *ad hoc* responses to concrete situations that include formerly marginalized people. In the Kamakura context, each innovative religious philosopher simplified praxis down to a single activity (*nenbutsu, zazen, daimoku*), rejecting the very attempt at a hegemonic, comprehensive system of praxis like that found in Tendai. The simplified Kamakura religions spread readily among the general populace. The philosophers took pains to justify that simplification, however. Despite their rejection of Shingon and Tendai esotericism, they often still made use of the holographic model to defend their praxes. If one did any one practice the right way, they argued, that one part of the whole panoply of Buddhist practices would give insight into the whole truth. This holographic thinking allowed fragmentation to be a positive development, since every fragment contains the whole. Fragmentation can then be simplification without loss. This was the core idea behind the Kamakura period's emphasis on the "selection" (*senjaku* or *senchaku*) of a single text or single practice.

For the Edo period, my study of the era's rich variety of philosophies led me to an unexpected conclusion. It is common for scholars, in Japan as well as the West, to find in the Edo period an explosion of creative philosophizing leading to a profusion of schools of thought. It seems almost every philosopher had developed his own unique philosophy. Indeed, even our common grouping of the Confucians into "schools" like *kogaku*, *shushigaku,* and *yōmeigaku* may more derive

from Inoue Tetsujirō's Meiji reconstruction of Edo intellectual history than the way the philosophers understood themselves at the time. Yet, when I examined closely the Edo philosophers' standpoints, I found most differences among them to be slight. The smallest disagreements presented themselves as starkly opposed worldviews. This contrasted with the tendency in the medieval philosophers to assert repeatedly that they were *not* deviating from the tradition. Shinran's deviations from Hōnen were at least as great as Sorai's from Jinsai, yet Shinran insisted he was following what his master had meant, whereas Sorai stressed his own uniqueness whenever possible.

I theorized why there should be such a contrast between the Kamakura and Edo rhetoric on the issue of uniqueness and innovation. In the Kamakura period, the center of power, including the control of financial assets, was the Tendai-Shingon-shogunate-court complex. It was not only ill-advised, but outright dangerous, to be labeled a "heretic" by that establishment. Without its support, one could not build temples or accumulate the cultural capital to support a new religious institution. In the Tokugawa period, by contrast, philosophy had freed itself from that Buddhist institutional hierarchy and found its new home in the secularized life of the townspeople. To survive in that context, with few exceptions, meant that philosophers had to support themselves with tuition funds from students who attended their own academies. Another source of money was income from publication. This arose naturally from the opportunity presented by the skyrocketing literacy rate among the townspeople and new techniques in printing. The way for a philosopher to succeed in the Edo period was to define a distinctive niche in the marketplace of ideas. A philosopher had to advertise why students should come to his academy rather than the one across the street. The situation is like academic institutions today that compete for the same pool of students. Each school has to present itself as unique. The evidence from the Edo period supports this interpretation of commercial competition among philosophers. For example, bookstores sometimes posted *"gakusha banzuke"* in the format of sumo programs with ranks like *sekiwake* and *ōzeki* assigned to the philosophers from the East (Edo) and West

(Kyōto-ōsaka).

Finally, the modern period again encountered the familiar issue of how to harmonize newly introduced philosophies, only this time from the West instead of from China. The *Zeitgeist* of the Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa periods was a time of experimenting with new identities based on new ideas, including individualism and democracy. People wondered what it meant to be Japanese and what it meant to be Western. A common response, although posed in often radically different philosophical contexts, was that the Japanese intellectual and spiritual traditions avoided basic polarities within Western thought. Let us consider how four philosophers responded along such lines.

First, Nishida Kitarō's "logic of absolute nothingness" said the Western dichotomy between empiricism (the "*basho* of being") and idealism ("the *basho* of relative nothingness") was based in something more fundamental and primordial, the "*basho* of absolute nothingness." This was the inherently inexpressible domain of the "acting intuition" (*kōiteki chokkan*), a bodymind engagement with reality that can be abstracted in the direction of the physical world (body) of empiricism or in the direction of the intellectual world (mind) of idealism. In itself, however, the acting intuition is neither pole, but the inexpressible acting-feeling-thinking at their ground. This is not unlike Kūkai's bodymind esoteric praxis as the basis for all exoteric distinctions. Second, Watsuji's "betweenness" (*aidagara*) had a similar function for ethics instead of epistemology. He maintained there was an emptiness (*kū*) between the individual and the collective. Truly ethical actions occur by preserving the dialectical tension (the "double negation") between the polarities, an oscillation between the existential freedom of the individual and the traditional values of the collective. Third, as a philosopher of science and logic, Tanabe Hajime developed his "logic of the specific" to explain the logical need for there to be a middle ground between the universal and individual. This had implications for his philosophical anthropology. To analyze accurately the nature of human existence, Tanabe maintained, we must recognize what lies between and mediates our individuality and

our universal humanity, namely, our belonging to a *specific* society, culture, and nation. Without that middle logical category, we cannot understand how to live out our lives as fully human beings. Lastly, Kuki Shūzō was an aesthetician who argued along similar lines. Critiquing Heidegger's polarity between being itself (*Sein)* and the individual existence of human being (*Dasein*), Kuki emphasized something between, what he called the "being of a people" or "ethnic existence" (*minzoku sonzai*). Kuki thought this realm of being was the proper domain of aesthetic value because it resided not in some universal, eternal Beauty, nor in the relativistism of the individualistic artist. Instead, like the aesthetic of *iki* for the Edoites of the Tokugawa period, aesthetic value is most real as the expression of a specific culture at a specific moment in history.

The common thread in all four philosophers is their insistence that the way to harmonize opposites is not to subordinate one to the other, nor to transcend or sublate the tension between the two. Rather, it is to recognize that the polarities are not primary at all, but instead two poles abstracted out of a bodymind experience underlying them both. This kind of philosophy lives in the *in medias res*, instead of the interplay of discrete opposites.

The Possible Relevance of Japanese Philosophy to World Philosophy

Is there value for Westerners in studying Japanese philosophy beyond the goal of achieving a better understanding of Japanese culture and its intellectual development? Does Japanese philosophy have something to contribute today to philosophy in general beyond Japan's national borders? Two points stand out: the model of holographic thinking and the emphasis on cultural existence. As suggested earlier, the holographic model has an intriguing relevance to our postmodern fragmentation and de-centeredness. The contemporary West has not yet fully engaged and explored the holographic model of the relation of the whole-in-every-part. In postmodern theory, the holographic relation is usually no more than a "trope" or "figure of speech"

like synecdoche or metonymy. For today's critical theory, the part can, at most, be a *symbol* for the whole. The holographic relation in Japanese philosophy is not merely symbolic or a figure of speech, however. It is an *ontological* relation. Just as the genetic blueprint for my entire body is physically in every cell of my body, just as whole pattern is explicitly in every part of the pattern of a fractal or recursive set, the holographic theory implies the part is not just a symbol of the whole, but really contains the whole in some sense.

In deconstructing the hegemony of the "systematic" and "universal," postmodernism has made room for the formerly marginalized and subaltern voices to be heard. Difference can no longer be subsumed under the homogenizing, imperialist, and patriarchal structures of authority that use dominance to impose harmony. Yet, in its success, postmodernism leaves us with a fractured, splintered world devoid of real communication and cooperation. Our intellectual conversation is one in which each position takes its turn in expressing its voice. We listen to each view, but do not engage the view of the other because that would deny the integrity of its alterity. It is as if our conversations were no more than a set of self-introductions at the beginning of roundtable discussion that never gets to the discussion itself. We have become fractions without a whole to be a fraction of. The holographic model suggests, though, the fraction is not just a fraction; it is also a fractal. By examining carefully the individual, unique, and distinctive piece, we can find the whole. That relation is not one in which the whole swallows up the part as in the hegemonic modernism we have discarded. Instead, the holographic is visible when the whole and part resonate together. We discover our commonality *even while* delving into our distinctiveness.

This leads to the issue of cultural existence. We live *in medias res* and that must be where philosophy must begin. No philosophy can transcend its culture, but out of that cultural embeddedness, abstraction reveals the poles of individuality and universality. This individuality and universality must, therefore, recognize that they do not exist of themselves, but only as rarefied aspects of the primordial "betweenness" that is our cultural existence, our bodymind experience. As a

strictly logical category, individuality is everywhere the same—uniqueness. As a strictly logical category, universality is everywhere the same—oneness. What really makes us human is not our uniqueness or our oneness. It is the particular social, cultural, historical, ethnic, national way we live our lives in the midst of it all, as the *in medias res.* Humanity is not what we are; it is how we are.