

History: Nature, Karma, Revolution, Faith

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Preliminary remarks

[0] In the wake of defeat, our country's history was subjected to various kinds of criticism, from which there were many things we learned as a result. As fallacies in our history education have been pointed out, we must further observe that the history of our country as such is repository to many a problem that should give us reason to reflect. After hundreds of years of feudalism, though we have since gone through the modern ages of the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa, that tinge of feudalism is difficult to dispel even today, with the result that the history of our people has now been appended with the record of suffering caused by that great war of unprecedented proportions. Though there may be those who say that this episode is nothing to be ashamed of, I would contend that this is just one chapter of many in our history that we should deem sordid. My intention here, however, is not to touch upon these particular events, but simply to discuss the question of how we should regard our so-called history, and especially what bearing it has with regard to the furthering of religious awareness. Also, the democratic movement can be said to be making inroads in our country today. In that regard, we must ask what kind of relationships will history elicit from it in the long run, what kind of roles will it be allowed to play? I have no liking for communist thought. The reason is, firstly, communism is completely ignorant as far as religious existence goes. I also think this persuasive revolutionary notion now spreading throughout the world is one that can be seen to be diametrically opposed to our conception of historical and cultural awareness.

Main thesis

[1a] History is, first and foremost, what connects us to our past. As the historical process of our own past, it is what imparts us our destiny. History thus bears for us the significance of being a kind of heavy burden that we have no way to escape. Our backs burdened with that heavy load, our legs dragging behind us shackled in its irons, these being the various entanglements to our existence that we cannot throw off, we go through life panting for breath every step of the way. This heavy burden amounts to what would appear to be the complete denial of our freedom. There is, firstly, no one who is born into this world out of their own free will. There is no one who chooses out of their own will what country or society or people they wish to be born into, there is no one who is born into whatever status or social class they so desire. Thus even as we are being born, we are being denied our freedom of choice, this life of ours already being one that has been forced on us.

[1b] The very first thing we notice about this Self of ours is that it is a forced and fated existence, and in that sense it exists in the midst of a world without freedom. In that case, with regard to this Self we notice, all of the things surrounding that Self, what it calls my world or my environment, are nothing other than things that have been simply assigned to it. While this would point to a completely inexplicable world of the unknown, all the same this is no doubt the world from which we are said to arise at birth and return at death. That is the place we consent to label as history. It is not something we have created; it is, rather, as if we are the ones being created by it and made to exist here today; "this" world is

history; in the broad sense it is our environment. As those created by history, from the first time we open our eyes to this awesome world around us, that is, when peeping between the cracks we observe and analyze for ourselves this world in which our Self exists, we discover in it the mountains and rivers, the moon and stars, and so on that make up its natural features. From the people and animals in the distance to our immediate neighbors and brothers and wives, we come across a complexity of relationships and feelings and customs that holds this Self together; here we discover the Self to be, in the broad sense, a so-called social existence. And so when you take all of these aspects of native temperament (fudo) and society and so on and roll them up into a ball, and then tug on it broadly and draw it out along time so that it stretches into the past, there you discover the Self that exists as an historical entity.

[1c] Thinking of it thus, our history might be said to be our native land. Its soil clings to us, imparting us the color of our skin and determining the direction of our tendencies. Even the stink of our bodies has its origins here.

[1d] As an individual Japanese, there are times when I am acutely aware that my body has a distinctively Japanese odor. This body smell as such is an _expression of our past history. Body odor is not something we are usually aware of. If we were always conscious of it, surely we would find it odious and unbearable. But however disgusting one finds one's body odor, there is not a single thing that one can do about it. Indeed, it is more likely that those who are annoyed by it now, will in time forget the entire matter and resume their lives again, body odor intact.

[1e] As I was born and raised in Japan's native temperament (fudo), I was immersed in the sweeping political, social, and religious changes that led the country into war, I experienced the war that took us to the brink of death, but living through it, I am now caught up in the maelstrom of crushing forces that engulfs postwar Japan. Although these are but the experiences of a single individual, at the same time there is not a single thing that I can do about these facts of the past.

[1f] Among these facts, the natural elements shaping our native temperament (fudo) would seem difficult to mold to our will. In this land straddled at times by semitropical heat, where we grow up under threat of typhoon and have to struggle with earthquakes, these natural elements importantly go toward tempering our personality. It is not clear to me what people mean by the term "island mentality" (shimaguni konjo), and while it of course has something to do with the fact that ours is an island nation, the problem is that I cannot sense it directly. But regardless of whether I am conscious of it or not, it has made me what I am by predicating many a decisive change in my makeup. "Though I was at one time pure and spotless, I was colored by those elements I was immersed into," is not what I mean. At an even more fundamental level, these elements themselves are what I call "me." History is what I am.

[1g] Compared to Nature's mountains and rivers, Society is relatively easy to mold to our will. Altering a mountain or a river poses many problems, hence society is often what is targeted by us for change. But as society's historical past begins to exert the same degree of pressure on us as nature once did, this confronts us with a number of difficult problems. When we look at what we did when our country was at war, we cannot deny that we, who had endured the Tokugawa, Meiji, and Taisho ages and so on, were part of a society that had its own particular history. It is thus that our present has come to be. Society is the womb of history. Indeed, while history is a product of society, it is a history that is being molded by time. At the same time, when seen from the standpoint of history, society's present is nothing other than history's leading edge. *Although society is actually the crystallization of the historical past, as [this past] gushes forth it is none other than the present. What we mean by the present, then, is what is determined by the past, a past that unilaterally permeates the characteristics of the present.

[1h] This is akin to what Buddhism calls karmic retribution. It is the solemn recognition of the truth of cause and effect. Words such as "samsara" (transmigration) closely approximate the concept of what we call "history." As an Indic term there are cases where it corresponds to "historical documents," but there is virtually no case where it conveys the contextual meaning of society or history. But, as far as India goes, this does not mean that there is no history. Samsara is a term used in contrast to Nirvana. Here, the religious standpoint versus the worldly standpoint of historical society was a distinction captured by the term samsara. To the Indian way of thinking, other than the term samsara, there is no word to express our fatal attraction to this essentially historical way of being which is so eager to engage in karma and samsara. Man's historical existence thus locates itself squarely in karma and samsara.

[2a] However, it is in Nature that the freedom we claim for ourselves lies. By subjugating Nature, we can change the way it is. But it is no easy matter to change a mountain or a river, and there are some things we can do nothing about. In particular, there is the smell of our bodies and the color of our skin that our native land has appointed us. When at times we are aware of our own body odor, we just end up depressed and hating ourselves. Everything here is so small scale, like a landscape of miniature gardens! Oh, how we would like to leave it all behind, how we would like to do away with this shuffling island mentality lock, stock, and barrel, and make a flying leap into the broad open spaces of the world. Instead we are shrouded in by the dim light of cloud covered day set against a background of dingy old pines that barely recognizes the fresh young life sprouting in its midst – this is our country. We would much rather be living in Persia or Mongolia, where the limpid, indigo blue waters of the bay below stretch out as far as the eye can see, where the great earth above presents us with a satisfying vista of solid red earth extending deep into the distance. To those who want to call the vistas of our own land middling then middling it is; they would rather float over to those heavenly lands of garishly bright colors and thick straight lines. But such desires aside, if people were to go in the other direction and look back to the garden of the Self, then within the world of the Self they would be able to abundantly enjoy the Nature they find therein. Finding beauty in the garden of the Self and beautifying the life therein, these elegant activities are those granted only to humans. This is man's freedom of _expression with regard to nature. Man's moral and ethical standards with regard to society can also be said to gush forth from a similar source. Our native land is, for people, that place in our Self most difficult to come to terms with; for it is at once that hatefully malodorous self, as well as that ancient home (kokyo) of ours dearer to the heart than anything else. There are things in our lives we want to blank out, things about our provenance that we want to hide; but in the end, of all the things belonging to the Self, the one that is most difficult to trade away is this ancient home of ours. For the soul especially, once its long years of wandering come to an end, this old village (furusato) of ours is the place that it returns to at last. *Even with regard to the history of society, we can say that no similar relationship maintains.

[2b] "Let's put our country down in history," "Let's put our people down in history," these facts of the past remain with us as facts, and there is not one thing we can do about it. It is from "there," from those facts, that we are obliged to take our starting point. However, unlike nature, what we call society is the target of reformation and reform. That is because it serves as the stage for our actions. History in this sense is nothing other than the history of society's progress, development and evolution. As those born from out of that crucible, for us, the social environment stands on a par with our native land. Thus we are both the children of society and the children of the age. But once a person is born, that fact serves as a platform that functions for further creative renewal. I am born and this serves as the platform for historical society to give birth to a new social history. It is here that we find the creativity and freedom of human activity and actions. This is because the future is completely unknowable. As life tomorrow is unpredictable, tomorrow is an infinite that

spreads out broadly to embrace a great number of possibilities. Tomorrow's unknowable "impermanence" (mujo) is thus what guarantees our freedom.

Author's remarks

[00] (Karmic transmigration is not a denial of such freedom. Karma does not mean that, from the beginningless past to the eternal future, everything is predestined. Karma, rather, while opening up the possibility for us to argue that good deeds will bear fruit in the future, is the basic framework for such an argument. However, this does not mean that a certain actual entity such as myself first has to exist which then bears the burden of the past. What actually exists, rather, is the great flow from karma to retribution; it is when we have to bear the burden of karma that we first realize that "I am." All that exists is this great flow from karma to retribution, hence in the thinking of the Indian people, what exists primarily is karma and samsara, and not the individual existence. The individual does not undergo samsaric transmigration; rather, Life (seimei) itself is the sheer fact of samsaric transmigration; it is nothing more than the particulars pertaining to this fact that the individual discovers. That individual – that is, the individual who discovers the functioning of karma – for that reason feels compelled to do something, and as such is none other than the protagonist (shutai) of freedom. The individual is no more than the flecks of foam formed between the waves of samsara, and who, as the protagonist of freedom, has a flame constantly burning in their hearts which says, "There is something that I must do.")

[2c] History is thus the turning point at which the various aspects of society move forward in leaps and bounds. If history is a function of time, then society is that which broadly fills the spatial dimension, thus while history's leading edge is the historical society that occupies the spatial dimension laterally, it evolves by serving as the interface mediating the actions implemented by humans. History in the past is necessarily determinative, but as it turns to the future it is nothing more than the full implementation of freedom. Such human freedom is what truly emerges in the form of social revolution.

[3a] Social reformation or revolution is the basic stuff of human life activity, and must be said the purest form of human action. Just as we cannot help but sense the beauty of the natural world around us, so too must we ever seek to improve the society in which we live to make it even better. The fact that we experience the beauty of mountain and stream and are conscious of its beauty, is a particularly human trait that sets us apart from other animals; hence the reformation of the society in which we live is an even more purely human action. Our wish is to constantly seek to make society even better. Revolution thus embodies our wish for the future, to ever turn our hopes to the future that faces us.

[3b] But Reformation that looks to the future should not forget the past. It will not do to cut ourselves off from past history. There is a tendency among revolutionary thinkers to deny all past history in their mad press forward. They say the past is made up entirely of lies and mistakes, that true history, or what history ought be, starts from today, and that everything up to yesterday is as if it did not exist. For the time being let us allow that there is no reason why such a rationale ought not be permitted. After all it is only natural that those who pin all their hopes on the future would want to cut off all ties to the past completely and to eradicate it completely. Especially when it comes to that great and difficult feat known as Revolution, it is necessary for us to have such blind fervor as to no longer see the past at all. Out of blind fervor we become a torrent in history that nothing can stop, all things of old being swept away before it – this scenario repeating over and again in revolutionary histories. Herein all things labeled as the past, all things that adorn the past in some way, however small, are all errors and lies and are marked as criminal and evil; they are to be denied and punished and totally eradicated. This is truly frightening. But this is one aspect of the raw energy generated by revolution as it proceeds. Yet by dint of that

very fervor it is impossible to be cool and rational. Revolution has no choice but to be violent. Originally, the revolution was in order to look to the future to build a better society. But when revolution proceeds solely out of blind fervor, what guarantee is there that what we perceive to be the true evaluation of the future shall indeed be ours? In our blindness we not only overturn and deny past history, we also are blind with regard to the future. In most revolutionary movements, the truth is they end up repeating many of the same old errors.

[3c] Of all human projects, the likes of social reform has to be the most rational and proper of all. To build that better world can only be realized by actions that are girded with clear and cool theoretical insight. This is what the fervent yet blind fail to have. What comes to the rescue of the blind is nothing other than a proper historical awareness with its respect for the past. That true history starts from today is the first point of a revolutionary awareness. The criticism of the past that this [awareness] ushers in is the basic condition of revolution. Revolution as such is originally a criticism of the past, which necessarily includes historical reflection. However, that criticism is one that unilaterally denies the past, and in its madness revolution proceeds to sentence the past in its entirety to the guillotine. As History through revolution makes tremendous leaps, it seems to us that as the sun mounts the heavens it shines on a new land from which the ghosts of the past have all been dispersed. But swept up in its mad critique of the past, people sentence their fellow man to the guillotine where they are ruthlessly slaughtered, and these [acts] they carry out with every feeling of malice and ill will – can this be a true criticism of the past or a proper reflection on history? A criticism of the past cannot simply mean to bury the past. When revolution is carried out most rationally, this is truly revolutionary. Fervor might be the "active ingredient" of revolution, but it is not what drives revolution to completion.

[3d] If "history begins today" were sufficient in itself, this took place in 1941 when the Japanese people were rallied together and made aware of [this cry]. With the Pacific War, a new age was ushered in, true history has begun, were the phrases intoned, but in the end what exactly was it that was ushered in? Looking outwardly we abandoned the past, looking inwardly we held the past in esteem to the point of excess; as such we erred in estimating our own present abilities. We are only now learning firsthand just exactly how much effort is needed to set right the immense unhappiness it left us with. The mistake in our thinking with regard to past history and the subrational fervor are similar if not identical. Revolution too, when out of pride it starts to become excited and to act without thinking, must be sternly warned against. It will leave us with the same unhappiness, it will repeat the same mistakes, it will make a fool of itself before human wisdom.

[3e] Revolution is not simply a matter of turning one's face to the future; you must know that you are being compelled to do so by past history. While we are burdened down by the weight of the past, there is at the leading edge of this burden a thin slip of freedom that presents itself. We should not regard this freedom as an arbitrary one. To simply pronounce the past as evil and part ways with it at an individual level is tantamount literally to suicide. To eradicate one's past is the same as eradicating oneself from the face of the earth. To be contemptuous of one's own history is a form of misanthropy. To hold one's history in contempt is to be aware at times one's own stink, an experience we could do without. But simply to deny it and bury it away is not sufficient; we should, rather, take it up positively and learn to tolerate it. To deny the past is simply to escape, and is not constructive. That is the suicide chosen by those of weak character; it is not a way to live out [our destiny]. To throw off the nightmare of the past is not only impossible, if one thinks that by such a device we are to acquire a way to live, that is the height of folly. For this means nothing short of divorcing ourselves from society and parting ways with life as we know it as humans.

[4a] In karma thought, the fact that we are made to fix our eyes on the karma of the self and to gaze into its depths means that it is not a denial of things past and historical. For that reason, karma is often easily misunderstood as a doctrine of deterministic fatalism. However, karma is not simply a form of fatalism, and there is freedom to be had in karma, or action, as explained above. Karma's evil is not exclusive to the past; in the freedom directed toward the future, there is ample room for karma's evil to come into play. Freedom is not always [concomitant with] good; it is in the context of such freedom, rather, that we witness the birth of evil. Revolution is also a kind of karmic activity. Revolution takes place with the intention of seeking the good; it turns its face exclusively to that future good. It may be due to this [revolutionary] fervor that it is unaware of its being gravid with evil. But while revolution is not entirely good, even in the case of a righteous revolution it will perpetuate the mistakes of evil content. Yet even in the face of the existence of such evil, the point is there is freedom (such freedom belonging to the respective personality), and this is truly what is meant by karma so-called.

[4b] And so we might say that although revolution aspires to avoid the various errors of the past again, as always true to form and on its own it falls into the same errors, and so it cannot be said to truly deny them. Revolution, come hell or high water, has to be theoretically sound or else. For revolution to properly build the future, it needs to be built on the grounds of rescuing us from the existing errors of the past. To arrive at a correct conception of past history, we need to affix to it the true direction it is set to develop in the future. Past as well as future have to be correct or else. If in a revolutionary mode we recognize only history as it moves toward the future and make light of the past, or, if inversely in a conservative mode we pay respect only to the past and have a longing for it, making us lose our youthfulness and fervor, this will not do. But then again with regard to the idea of the "righteousness" of a revolution, that alone cannot be the only good. What people in their everyday mentality regard as theoretically correct does not always fall within the bounds of good. Let God be the judge of good and evil, they say. But religion's good and evil overturns such notions of righteousness and good and evil, and transcends such distinctions when it establishes itself. While it transcends such distinctions in order to attain the world of the highest truth, as far as the worldly are concerned this ushers in no substantial growth. That's because it is unrelated, as it were, [to the worldly]. Because it is unrelated, what the worldly regard as righteous or good and evil does not serve as a yardstick for religion's good and evil. God's final judgment will not be to punish man for their deeds. God's judgment will in fact not amount to a judgment. God's reward and punishment will not amount to any form of reward or punishment at all. For religion's good and evil cannot be said to bear any similarity to the worldly sense of good and evil.

[4c] Karma's so-called good and evil consequences assume this religious meaning. Religious rebirth is not to throw away one's past karma lock, stock and barrel; it is to take the past's checkered history as it is, the evil as evil, the good as good, and to be reborn thereby by grasping it anew. Through this new birth one becomes a different person altogether. Though a new life journey is said to begin, this does not mean a person is no longer bound by the ropes of karma. Once we realize that karma is something we can never shake ourselves free of, we become one who no longer tries to shake ourselves free. If one thinks it possible to slip free of it, that borders on suicide or simple escape wherein we no longer want to face up to the facts; it is not a transformation of our karma in any real way. Thus religious rebirth is not a closing of our eyes to the past; it is, rather, a penetrating look into the past.

[4d] Past history and karma are things which, if we were to separate ourselves from them, would result in our ceasing to be the person we are. For that reason, karma should not be regarded by us as something heavy and oppressive; it should rather be seen as something imparting us with life; it has to be our joy of life. While it is most certainly the case that history as karmic bondage is an oppressive burden, that burden instead becomes one that we joyfully take upon ourselves. That is, when we realize that this burden itself is our very own life force, we own up to the karma as ours, and in so doing we truly become free.

When this happens, the karmic consequences of our past karma put us in a joyful state of mind that leaves us reciting the nenbutsu. As to the fine point of what "Buddha" is it exactly that these nenbutsu are being directed, that is not important to answer. Though our karma troubles us, at the same time such karma is our reason to rejoice – this is the important point we should take note of. That I exist as nothing other than a heap of karma, and that this realization becomes the starting point of a new me, this is something over which to rejoice. If I were to become something that I was never meant to be, that is, if I were to become something not indicated by my past karma, if I were not burdened down by the weight of my past karma and was completely cut off from that past karma, if I were to become a completely new existence, then there would be no joy in that. My resurrection lies in the fact that this soul of karma that I am should use that karma as a springboard to resurrect myself; such joy would not exist if I were to become someone else. In this case, past karma is always evil and nothing else; this is exactly as revolution describes it: the past as being that which must be eradicated and denied. But a new life is also the continuation of that karma, and there is no way that we become affable good men or saints. As far as freedom goes, karma is to be sensed as evil. On this point, there is a point of difference with revolution that professes to be a rational righteousness. In religion, there is no getting around our sensing karma as evil. When social revolution proudly intones its righteousness, in the same person of religious bent there is the awareness of sin and evil at the root source, and it is in that sinful and evil karma that one comes to uncover a joy that one would not trade for anything in the world.

[4e] With regard to religious faith, the same structure can be said true. In religious faith, it is not a matter of our believing in some object out there, or believing that we will be saved at some point in future time, and suppressing all doubts otherwise. It is not in a future savior, but rather in our own past karma that a religious realization establishes itself in tangible form. As Zendo clarified in his idea of the two kinds of profound religious conviction, faith on the one hand is to know that "this person who I am has, from vast kalpas past to the present moment, been constantly drowning and constantly subject to drifting aimlessly in transmigration with no hope of ever being released from that state"; this deep conviction of the seeker is on a par with the realization in regard to past history. At the same time, the seeker believes that "the Buddha's 48 vows welcomes living beings into itself, and that without doubt and without making conditions, it will see that we attain birth [in the Pure Land] by letting us ride on the power of the Vow"; this conviction is the prospect one has as one looks to the future. However, as these two contradictory convictions form a unity, this is a single belief; it is in faith that these two form a contradictory consistency (mujunteki toitsu). The recipient of past history is not simply a historically fated being; in the freedom to act lies the starting point of all future revolutions: the turning point of the present. Unless we make recourse to the turning point of our present suffering, there is no salvation in store for us. Further, only this turning point can impart us the courage to resurrect the true future and the strength for our own rebirth. If we do not come into that freedom – which stands on a par with faith – for that turning point, the past would be nothing but oppressive and evil and is to be rightly denied. We would of course uncover no joy within [that past]. The only thing we could do would be to drop out from that past and fall into a self-destructive decadence.

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