

# ***Nishida Kitaro's Character***

***Nishida Kitaro Sensei no hitogara, 1992***

**by Nishitani Keiji; W.S. Yokoyama, trans.**

I'll be talking on the theme of Nishida Sensei's character. It is of course impossible to separate his character from his achievements as a philosopher. But today, in what amounts to reflections on the theme, I plan to discuss only the aspect of his character. Seen from philosophy as a discipline, Nishida is regarded as a Philosopher of the World. Philosophy is a field that developed largely in the West, but since it concerns itself with what lies at the basis of human existence, its purview is not limited to the West.

We could say that Nishida is rooted in the Western tradition, but a Western tradition to which he has added an Eastern thought system, in particular Buddhism, as well as Confucianism perhaps. Importing into Western philosophy deep strata of that thought system long passed down in the East, he combined the two, making them, as it were, the raw materials of his thought.

This was not the exclusively Western philosophy spoken of nowadays. Nishida regarded Eastern thought as a philosophical system of equal importance, and drawing from the contents of both traditions, he became the Architect of a novel philosophical system. In that sense Nishida was unlike the many great Western philosophers that had come before him. He was the first such philosopher to appear in the modern age. Whether in the West or East up to then, no such philosopher like Nishida had ever appeared who, bringing the West and the East to collide, fused them together into one great World where there was neither East nor West, but a world inclusive of both.

His philosophizing from the platform of such a World the womb of the modern age had given birth to is no doubt one of the most salient characteristics of his philosophy. And so when we say he was a Philosopher of the World, while we of course mean he was a world class philosopher, the content of what we intend by this title is somewhat different than usual. This was a world in the greater, modern sense, a World inclusive of East and West. We might say this was something that could only happen in Japan, since no such figure appeared in the West or, for various reasons, in the East inclusive of China and India.

Only Japan was swift to absorb Western culture, but it also kept its Eastern culture relatively intact, and it was in this situation that people like Nishida were born. When Sensei was studying to become a philosopher, he wrote to himself in his diary, "It's not for the sake of that individual called Nishida, nor for the sake of that individual country called Japan." That is, he was not pursuing this path for fame and fortune. Nor was he doing it so that Japan would flourish. He was thinking of a platform of much greater dimensions. It might have been that he felt compelled to do so. And he demanded it of himself.

I believe he wrote somewhere, "I will make the draft of my will meet that demand." However much he aspired to do so, however much a Philosopher of the World he hoped to be, the fact was his feet stood planted in this country called Japan; after all, he was not living in a vacuum (literally, floating in space). That's why he was always so concerned with the fate of this country, Japan, especially during time of war. Around then, the newspapers reported people were abandoning the country left and right and going overseas, and I can understand there might have been need for that.

But Nishida was not such a one. When he had to choose, he chose Japan. Returning to what he said earlier, Sensei did philosophy for his own sake. He might have said he was not doing

it for that individual called Nishida, but when he had to choose, he chose to do it for himself, Nishida. This was the wide platform he conceived. It was for the sake of Japan, and it was also for the sake of that individual named Nishida. It was not for Japan, it was not for himself, but if we were to state it from that broad platform of the World, what was for Japan's sake and what was for Nishida's sake shared the same moment. He was not living in a vacuum, but had his feet firmly planted on the ground, on that broad platform [of the World].

Sensei has a poem that goes:

*When I die, bury me in the hills of my ancient land,  
that in dream I may speak again with friends of old.*

This expresses what he truly feels, that ancient land being the land of his birth where his feet are planted. Here he's talking about Japan, since that was his homeland. At the same time, there is the broad platform of the philosophy he created, a great platform inclusive of East and West, a platform for this modern new world that he helped pioneer, where these two cannot be separated from one another. This, it would seem, is Sensei's ancient land, and it is this basic standpoint we should remember him by. Now, as to the matter of Sensei's character, it was through long years of working with him indirectly that I came to know his character.

The fact is I was born on the Noto peninsula, and when I first started reading Sensei's book it was by sheer chance; I knew nothing of his also being born in the same area as I was. At the time Sensei was not famous, and I was just a high school student in Tokyo. It was merely a book by an author I'd never heard of that I happened to buy. But there was something intriguing about what it had to say, and so that's how it all started. Nor did I know that Sensei was a graduate of that [famous] high school in Kanazawa, and I read the book knowing nothing about who he was.

This was at a time when I was undecided as to what to do. I had a general disdain for all fields of endeavor, though my classmates were planning to go on to Tokyo University, a track ordinarily leading to careers as government officials, business executives, and politicians. From the start I had not the slightest intention to follow suit. But what it was I wanted to do I hadn't a clue. In the midst of my confusion I happened to find Nishida Sensei's book. The book was difficult, and I couldn't understand what it said, but somehow I knew this is what I wanted to do. It could be things wouldn't work out, but at the time I thought to myself this was the direction I want to pursue, even if I had to muddle my way through. And so I went to Kyoto.

It was there that I learned for the first time that Nishida Sensei was from Unoke [on the Noto peninsula] and was a graduate of Shiko (the famous high school in Kanazawa). He had even been to Ushitsu, the town where I was born. For a year or so he was a middle school teacher in Nanao, and to promote his school, made the rounds of the Noto peninsula, staying a night or two in Ushitsu. I was astounded to hear this. As regards his character, I cannot say precisely what gave me direct insight into it, but since it was possible for me to pursue the course I did without qualms, there is something to be said about the powerful impact it had on me.

It's not easy for me to express it in words, but it issues from the fact that, when it came time to do studies under Nishida, I did it risking my entire life in the enterprise. There are many ways to approach a field of discipline, but when all is said and done, a field of study comes to life only when you put your whole life on the line, applying yourself to it, throwing yourself at it. By "whole life" I mean the totality of my entire living existence from birth to death.

What the future holds in store I do not know, but this moment of that whole I'm experiencing as I live in this world, that, I would contend, is my Whole Life. And I'm fairly sure you will agree. It's an important time in life when a man has to settle on a career. A man has to choose the path he wants to pursue. So too must a woman seek employment or marriage. When you think of these decisions in terms of your entire life, it is at times like these that you set your course in life. It is at times like these that you wager your entire life. When Sensei had to decide, he was a person who lived by throwing himself into his work. If philosophy, set your sights on philosophy as your life path.

At basis, this embodied a deep resolve to give up one's entire life to the cause. Of course there were times when he had to study, but even when he wasn't, it seemed his every gesture, his every movement, as it were, at basis contained that resolve. This was what struck me so forcefully about his character. This I think is a most valuable point. What you learn at school, the discipline and the knowledge, are important, but what does it mean to you to learn this discipline? Better you throw yourself into it, since everything else holds no attraction for you, even if it turns out to be the biggest mistake of your life, even if you die along the way.

It makes a great difference, I feel, whether, if prepared for it, you engage it in this spirit or not. It's important that the scholar broaden and deepen his field, but more than being just another know-it-all, you must put your entire life on the line in this enterprise, you must throw your entire self into it, and that's far easier said than done. It's important to learn the knowledge that's already archived, but once you've gotten that down and it's your move, your pursuit of learning forces you into that extremely difficult situation where you must wager your entire life. The Nishida Sensei I knew was a stern and intimidating figure. Though I'm frail of body, there's a part of me that's fearless when dealing with people.

Due in part to my upbringing and in part to my natural constitution, I never felt intimidated before eminent people. This was a fairly constant feature with me. About the only person that might have scared me was Nishida Sensei. First and foremost was what I mentioned earlier. When Sensei was really doing philosophy he threw his entire self into it -- from here issued his sternness and fearsome disposition. It was a different kind of fear than, say, the fear of what criminal elements might do.

There were all kinds of strict teachers, but by and large they were of a different breed. Sensei would rarely show his anger. It was his silence, rather, that was intimidating. Nor would he resort to stern words. When necessary he got angry. I've seen him explode in anger, but usually he was extremely reserved. Somehow he was intimidating, not in an ordinary way; that genuine sternness he manifested rose from the depths of the human soul. He did not expect it from all students, but should he ever detect we were not being true to ourselves in our pursuits, he would not hesitate to give us a piece of his mind.

These days people talk about being happy and feeling really alive. But what does it mean to feel really alive, what does it mean to be happy? Most of the time to feel really alive means to seek for something outside ourselves. We seek for something that will give us the feeling of being really alive. Feeling alive and being happy become things provided from outside. Once provided, we feel we're really alive. But if that's the case, our dreams are easily broken. Usually what happens is, we may hold to one thing, but the world moves on. It might be that at that time you get what you hoped for. But as we have partners in life, when that partner changes, we're in for a rude awakening, and in this tumultuous world of ours our happiness crumbles rapidly.

No matter, we say, and start the hunt for the next object of happiness. After awhile, it gets to you, you end up discouraged and don't know what to think. The true problem of happiness does not lie there; it is to become a person who does not get discouraged -- this

is what it really means to put your entire life on the line. Whatever it may be I'm going to do it, if I fail I fail. Along the way there will be times I'll lose my bearings, times when I have to make some hard decisions, but to the very end I will launch myself at the problem and give it my all, I will totally immerse myself in that world. Then for the first time you feel alive.

It's when you put your life on the line that you feel you're really living. Is it not from that quarter that true happiness emerges? This is not to seek something outside yourself. It's when you negotiate the problem with yourself that you get charged with yourself. In Sensei's case, he conceived a difficult philosophical system. He had a superb philosophical mind, but this was not [mere] talent. Talent might make an excellent scholar out of you, but what I sensed in Nishida Sensei's character was altogether different. It was by chance I read Nishida Sensei's book.

There was something about those essays that made me read them from cover to cover. I couldn't handle the difficult philosophical discussions, but somewhere in that book I was taken by surprise by something radiant that practically twinkled at me. Though I couldn't understand the philosophy he was presenting, in another sense there was something that somehow got across to me, and it was this I was attracted to. It was Sensei's character, it was the light of his character that came forth. In Nishida Sensei's book *Thought and Experience* is an essay called "Gutoku Shinran." Gu is said to mean "foolish", toku. "baldheaded."

It was by this name Shinran referred to himself, Gutoku Shinran, or Foolish Baldheaded Shinran. Toku is linked to the fact that monks shaved their heads. And so what's this all about? For instance, people have all kinds of talent, God-given talents, the talents of media stars, and there are many famous people who are regarded as heroes in politics and military. But somewhere I saw it written that a triangle is a triangle, whether large or small. As long as it is triangular in shape, big or small, it is the same: a triangle. Likewise, whether a person is a hero or ordinary man in the street, the basic configuration is the same.

That is what this Gutoku business is all about: whether a person is famous or not, the basic configuration of Gutoku is what they all come down to. That is, whether or not you're a famous person like Nishida Sensei, if there's not some one thing you bet your life on, that you throw yourself into, you can't say you've done anything with your life... Some people are born to be large triangles, others small... but large or small, the basic configuration remains the same.

A large pyramid-sized triangle and a tiny one share the basic quality of a triangle, where the sum of their two inner angles equal one right angle; that's unchanged, and whether they're large or small is irrelevant. This is the point Nishida Sensei makes in "Gutoku Shinran," one of his relatively early essays. Even here, if we think what it is a person ought to devote his life to, it is clear in Nishida Sensei's case that his would be the difficult path of philosophy. But even if ours is not as difficult a calling as his, surely there's something we can do better than others.

Once you discover that talent of yours, set your course on it, thrown yourself into it. Nishida Sensei was like that, and from that point on he paid no heed to what others may say about him. He lived in rather unfortunate circumstances, and since he was only human I imagine he must have been rather dissatisfied at times. The worst things were the family tragedies that befell him one after another, forcing him to endure tremendous suffering. Grown sick of life, he composed the poem:

*How tedious this life of mine  
Thus it is with me, on this winter day.*

But recovering from that experience, he finally came to realize that,

*In the depths of my heart there is such Joy,  
Where the waves of grief cannot reach me.*

In the heart there is trouble, grief, and occasionally joy. But at base, transcending them all, there is that Someone. This Someone he clearly realized in his heart. This does not mean that, after he realized it, he no longer worried. When someone in his family fell ill he worried, when his country was at war he was extremely worried. In the East, the word Heaven has long been used in association with the Good Heart. In [Confucian] Yang-ming studies the Good Heart belongs to one who has left behind his ancient haunt of human desires.

From a carpenter's standpoint, for instance, the Good Heart discerns whether his own work is good or not; others might not notice it, but the carpenter knows; that is, the world might not notice, but you know. At the same time it is said that, "Once you know what Heaven wants of you, you know what the World wants of you." That is, the Good Heart stands on the broad platform of Heaven and earth. In Nishida Sensei's case, he elevates the problem to the World level.

In Shinran's case, it takes place on the broad platform of [Mahayana] Buddhism. This is the broad platform, the standpoint of Heaven and earth, the broad standpoint we penetrate to out of severity. It is when we are true to ourselves that we can be true to others, we can be true to what we are inherent endowed. It is when we settle on what Heaven would have us do that we assume a place on that broad platform.

(Collected Works 15:12-21)