

Japanese Aspects of Nishida's *Basho*

Seeing the "Form without Form"

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Basho (場所) is a concept that characterizes Nishida Kitarō's thought in his middle period and logically completes the system of his subsequent philosophy. His 1926 essay "*Basho*" surveys the idea (which may be translated as "place" or "locus"), and establishes *basho* as his own original logic. It is the logic of *basho* that set the foundation of Nishida's philosophy as it opens up from a theory of knowledge to encompass the aspect of the "historical world."

Philosophy in Japan has inherited traditions from both the Western and the Eastern worlds since the modern Meiji period, to which the origins of the discipline called "philosophy" or *tetsugaku* (哲学) may be traced. The term *tetsugaku* to designate Japanese traditional thought did not exist prior to the Meiji period. Nishida was no exception. Both Western and Eastern sources are indispensable for a consideration of his philosophy, although references to Eastern thought constitute no more than a minor part of his philosophical discourse. When, on limited occasions, he refers to "Eastern thought," he mainly mentions ideas that can be found in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It appears that he did not devote himself to a philosophical analysis of Buddhist doctrine. His essential contact point with Buddhism was the practice of Zen meditation to which he devoted himself seriously for about ten years as a young man. Compared

with other denominations, Zen is characterized by a complete rupture between immediateness and explanation, thus rejecting the logic that is the basis of philosophy. Nishida experienced this contradiction in his own person, and in a sense it may be said that the ascetic practices contributed to the publication of *An Inquiry into the Good* (『善の研究』, 1911). This first philosophical essay of Nishida's introduced the idea of "pure experience" in the sense of knowing the "facts as they are" (NKZ I: 9) without differentiating between subject and object. However, he concealed the traces of Zen influence in his literature, as a letter addressed to his disciple, Nishitani Keiji, in 1943 attests (NKZ 19: 225). Nishida was disappointed when people confused his philosophy with Zen; his ambition was to combine these two very different ways of thinking. He hoped to disprove the impossibility of reconciling Zen's immediate grasp of reality in the truest sense with a philosophy of self-reflection by way of objectification.

As the above background sketch shows, the concept of *basho* is an intersection of Eastern and Western thought, and the Zen approach to reality underlies the logic of *basho*. Nishida compares the characteristic features of Eastern culture, in particular Japanese culture, to "seeing the form without form" (形なきものの形を見る). His project of constructing a logic of *basho* is tied up with this, as makes clear states in the preface of *From Acting to Seeing* (『働くものから見るものへ』, 1927), where the logic of *basho* is first introduced.

What is the meaning of the contradictory expression "seeing the form without form?" How does Nishida integrate this Japanese concept into the logic of *basho*? I will examine these questions by focusing on its Japanese aspects.

THE CULTURE OF EMOTION

I shall begin by considering the expression "seeing the form without form" from the cultural point of view by which Nishida presented it. I quote from the preface of *From Acting to Seeing*:

Obviously there is much to admire and much to learn from the dazzling developments in Western cultures where form belongs to being

and taking form is seen as good. But is there not something fundamental in the cultures of the East that have nurtured our ancestors for thousands of years, something beneath the surface that can see the form without form and hear the voice without voice? I would like to attempt to give a philosophical grounding to the desire that drives our minds continually to seek this out. (NKZ 4:6)

The quotation shows Nishida's desire to build up a new philosophy through an appreciation of his own traditional culture. "Without form" here refers to "non-being" (*mu* 無), which in fact distinguishes the basis of the logical structure of *basho*. According to Nishida, non-being is the metaphysical point of view that grounds Eastern culture, unlike Western culture which merely acknowledges "something with form," "the formed," or "the determined" as "reality" (実在). Nishida develops this idea in *The Forms of Culture of the Classical Periods of East and West from a Metaphysical Perspective*¹ (『形而上学的立場から見た東西古代の文化形態』, 1934) (NKZ 7).

From the viewpoint of culture Nishida distinguishes Eastern "non-being" from Western "being" (*u* 有). Examples of the former are seen in India and China, and those of the latter in the Greek, Christian, and Jewish worlds. Here I will focus on the essential points of Japanese culture that form the basis of Nishida's essay.

Nishida's cultural morphology has two types: an "immanent world" that is "based on the real world," and a "transcendent world" that is "based on the unreal world" (NKZ 7: 442). In the real world, subject and object opposites are dialectically unified. It is not a question here of organic unification, but rather a standpoint of thinking from the real world that implies self-contradiction. Conversely, the unreal world rejects self-contradiction.

Japanese culture falls under the "immanent world" classification, as do Chinese and Greek cultures, while Christian and Buddhist cultures typify the "transcendent world" type. The religious world is considered transcendent, and Japanese culture is characterized in terms of both "non-being" and "reality."

1. For an English translation, see DILWORTH 1988, 21–36.

Japanese culture is artistic and in this sense is comparable to Greek culture. Nishida takes note of its distinctive attributes, in particular the attribute of the Platonic Idea, of which he remarks “the shadow of the eternal is actuality (現実).” In other words, “the eternal” designating the “Idea” is perceptively invisible, while actuality is perceptively visible, but is like a “shadow” (NKZ 7: 443)—an “imitation” or “negation”² of reality. The Idea, which is separated from the sensible, signifies the “intelligible object” (443). Nishida’s adoption of the expression “seeing the form without form” to explain Japanese traditional culture is suggestive of Plato’s Idea. At the same time, Japanese culture is not intellectual but emotional (情的, 441–3) in the sense that it does not seek the timeless and visible. Emotion cannot be talked about in terms of the objective but by the impersonal that denies a rational (理性的) standpoint (443–4).

It would seem that Nishida’s main concern here lies in contrasting the emotional tendency of Japanese culture to the intellectual concept of the Idea developed in ancient Greece, rather than attempting a comparison of traditional Japanese culture to the Chinese culture that had such a large role to play in its formation. Nishida shows great interest in this contrast between emotion and Idea and, as we shall see later, his own original “logic of *basho*” will be very much inspired by the Greek Idea.

Emotional culture and intellectual culture are both artistic and yet the two are fundamentally different. Their similarities and differences can be seen from a spatio-temporal perspective. One of the typical Greek forms of art were the dramas that took up the problems of life. In contrast, the Japanese created short poems like *tanka* and *haiku*, which support Nishida’s claim that emotion is conceived as “form without form, voice without voice.”

He asserts that a culture of “form without form... is, like time, a formless unity” (445; DILWORTH 1988, 31) and like “music” (NISHIDA and MIKI 2007, 12). Temporal unity is no doubt embodied admirably in music, as Nishida states, and it is founded on “momentalism” (刹那主義), the idea that time is always conceived from the present (NKZ 7: 449–50; DILWORTH, 33). Nishida notes the “productivity” in time and the “evolution” in life, because “time is not just a passing flow” (NKZ 7,

2. These expressions are borrowed from MATTÉI 1996, 199 and 209.

445; DILWORTH, 31). We can therefore understand that temporal unity makes form appear. In other words, the appearance of form arises from the negation of time, that is to say, from its becoming spatial. Can the same be said of “the momentary fixation of streaming time” such as the moment when a *haiku* is produced?

Nishida analyzes the notion of emotion (感情)³ in a chapter of his 1920 work *Problems of Consciousness* (『意識の問題』, NKZ 3: 51–77). Emotion is a psychological component that evolves internally. When the evolving consciousness is objectified, Nishida argues, it is known as a “phenomena of consciousness,” and the “surplus that is never objectified in any case is emotion” (59). He asserts the transcendence of emotion over all intellectual actions, whereas Kant limited the latter to the action of formal judgment (60–1). In Nishida’s philosophical structure, emotion is an *a priori* of *a priori* at the “standpoint of the highest order” rather than the intellectual action of consciousness (59–60). “The content of emotion cannot be sought in intellectual elements, but is expressed only by means of art” (67). Hence, emotion is considered a source of intellectual creation.

We may now return to the question of emotion in Japanese culture. To form is to express, since, as Nishida observes, “no art can exist aside from form” (NKZ 7: 446; DILWORTH, 31). We can assume that to express is to grasp the flow of time in a flash. At the moment of grasping, form appears in the stream of time. It is in this way that art can be created. According to Nishida:

Greek arts saw the formless (無形) within form (有形)—while the distinctive quality not only of the Japanese arts but also of all Eastern arts grounded in the principle of non-beine—to lie in employing form to express what is formless. Eastern arts do not just symbolically represent other forms but reveal the formless. (NKZ 7: 446; DILWORTH, 32)

As stated above, “seeing the formless within form” means, in the Greek sense of art, seeking a timeless and immutable reality in the determined form of the actual world. Nishida clearly opposes the artistic cultures

3. *Kanjō* (感情) is often used as a psychological term and *jō* (情) is in more general use.

of being and of non-being. “Seeing the form without form” consists of revealing the form of the formless or the invisible, or to express what has not yet appeared by means of form. The invisible that the Eastern culture of non-being implies is the non-speakable and the non-conceptualized, but is also the invisible in the sense of Greek art as Idea, that is to say, the speakable and the conceptualized.

EMOTION IN NORINAGA’S *TANKA*

We shall now turn to the expression of emotion in traditional Japanese art, taking as our example the *tanka*, a short poem composed of thirty-one syllables. In the essay that we are focusing on here, Nishida occasionally cites the last twelve syllables of Motoori Norinaga’s (1730-1801) *tanka*:

朝日に匂う山桜かな
 Cherry blossoms
 glowing in the morning sun. (NKZ 7: 450. DILWORTH 1988, 34)⁴

What Nishida seeks from the context in which this artistic form is cited is the “object of emotion”:

The object of emotion cannot be intellectually determined. It cannot be frozen spatially. That present is infinitely dynamic. (NKZ 7: 450)

The passage explains what Norinaga’s “cherry blossoms glowing in the morning sun” expresses. Moreover, in the emotion that rejects subject-object dualism, we can feel Norinaga’s notion of *mono no aware* (もののあわれ, 444).⁵ As Nishida says, *mono no aware* designates the har-

4. The complete poem reads: 敷島の大和心を人間はば朝日に匂ふ山櫻花. The verses are inscribed on a 1790 portrait of Norinaga entitled “Motoori Norinaga: A Portrait of Self-Praise at Sixty-One”: 本居宣長六十一歳自画自賛像, which reads しき嶋のやまところを人とは朝日にはほふ山さくら花 (If one asks about the heart of Shikishima-Yamato, I would reply that it is like cherry blossoms glowing in the morning sun).

5. *Mono no aware* is an aesthetic notion which appeared in the literature and the aesthetic life in the Heian period (794–1192), and Motoori Norinaga pointed out and systematized its literal theory. See 『和歌大辞典』 [Dictionary of *waka*] (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin 1986), 996.

mony between the internal *aware* forming the emotion, and the external *mono* or thing. How does this explain the contradiction between the frozen present, as explained above, and the dynamic present?

Nishida reads “eternity” into this instant that is determined and frozen: “the true instant has to be what borders eternity.” “Eternity” involves “infinity” (無限) as was seen in the citation “infinitely dynamic.” This is a central point both to Nishida’s system of philosophy and to his understanding of *tanka* art. What is infinitely dynamic is also considered to be the “self-determination of non-being” (無の自己限定) (NKZ 7: 450) that functions as a philosophical device for the logic of *basho*. The non-being, in opposition to the being that comes to be realized into being, is a source of creation. This holds true not only for art but for all activities and phenomena in human life. The source of creation is not exhaustible but infinite, in other words *mugen* (the “mu” referring to “non-being”). When speaking of infinity, Nishida adopts the term “absolute nothingness” (絶対無), which he considered the best way of characterizing *basho*. The logic of *basho* takes on various levels of knowledge, from the dichotomy between subject and object, to the grasp of being, to the union of subject and object, to the grasp of non-being. In each case, the *basho* determines itself, without a subject determining an object or vice versa.

The idea of “eternity” has to be conceived in the light of what was stressed above, namely its capacity to resolve the problem of the self-determination of non-being. According to the logic of *basho*, time is not spatial and linear, “flowing from the eternal past to the eternal future” (NKZ 6: 187); it is ultimately personal and conceived within the self:

Time has to start from the fact that the present determines itself by conforming with the self-determination of time. Where there is the self of each person, there is the time of each self. It is not the I that is within time, but time that is within the I. (187)

Time determines itself when the self is fundamentally temporal. “Various changes of the self are decided by itself” (NKZ 14: 488). In Nishida, the self is not something substantial, but is considered non-being. Briefly put, time determines itself as non-being:

We come in contact with true time at the top of an instant as something that is truly non-being and self-determining. (190)

In the instant of the self-determination of time, the self makes its appearance; that is, the self is nothing other than the “fulfillment of time” (208). Time is the “absolute present” (絶対的現在), “into which the eternal past and the eternal future can be unified at every instant.” In this sense it is referred to as an “eternal now” (永遠の今, 188). As Nishida writes, “time passes eternally away as it comes eternally into existence” (203). Since the self appears at numerous moments, the present determines itself eternally and is “infinitely dynamic.” The self-determination of the dynamic present that is grounded in absolute nothingness takes place at the very instant of expression. The real existence of the expressing self seems to be conceived in this way.

Let us now turn to Norinaga’s poem (“cherry blossoms glowing in the morning sun”) to locate its concrete experience of emotion. A single bright scene of cherry blossoms is expressed in fourteen syllables, the artistic expression producing a highly visual effect. It is, as it were, a snapshot of an instant in time that reproduces the scene and preserves it eternally just as it is.

In a 1933 essay on “*Tanka*” (『短歌について』), Nishida writes that significant features of life appear in the course of our lives that can be grasped only in the form of a short poem (NKZ 13: 131). The quantitatively limited form such as we see in the *tanka* does not aim at a full description along with an analysis of actuality. The reality of “the cherry blossoms glowing in the morning sun,” without any expression of emotions, imply reproduces the scene itself. Fujita Masakatsu points out that *tanka* is like a kind of place (*ba* 場, FUJITA 1998, 147): Norinaga would have been moved by the simple beauty of the cherry blossoms, by its colors bathed in the morning sun, and so forth. Without trying to guess at the meaning of his *tanka*, the reader is still able to feel a certain emotion, an emotion that springs up of its own accord and recreates a particular scene in the poet’s life. This “place” is what is given full expression in the *tanka*.

What is expressed in *tanka* shares a place with the poet’s life and reality. To put it another way, “the self sees itself within the thing” (NKZ 6: 207) while grasping reality. Thus the sense of the “eternity of the present” or the “absolute present” or “eternal now” can be understood fittingly through the example of the *tanka*.

Kuki Shūzō expresses an opinion similar to Nishida’s. Kuki, who con-

structed his own theory of time in Japanese literature as a part of his philosophical system of contingency, attaches great importance to the “eternal now.” For Kuki, the present of the poem is eternal and infinitely deepening as it converges on the present. The emotion expressed in the poem cannot be repressed; it seems to burst forth from the present. It is because of this convergence on the present that the poem is necessarily short (KSZ 4: 47–8).

In appreciating a *tanka* we are free to sense something of the past or the future emerging from the present that serves as its starting point. Nishida notes that memory and present emotions live together at the bottom of a consciousness of the present. He briefly invokes Bergson's idea of consciousness presented in *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (NKZ 3: 260). We cite here a part of the passage in question:

I breathe in the smell of a rose, and the memories confused with childhood return immediately to my memory. These memories were by no means roused by the perfume of the rose: I breathe them in with the smell itself.⁶

THE STRUCTURE OF *BASHO*: A LOGIC OF FORM WITHOUT FORM

Nishida's concern was with constructing a logic that could assume a form without form. He sought to do so by reinterpreting Western logic and in the light of traditional Japanese culture. His criticism of Western philosophy rests on the fact that it takes only one position, subjective or objective, without considering any other alternative. He suggested an “enveloping logic” that would rise above the subject-object dualism, and to this end he turns to Greek philosophy where the dichotomy has not yet fully developed. In this sense, we can say that *basho* was formed as a new philosophical method that rejects the objectification of reality and indeed envelops the subjective view within the logic.

6. The French original reads: “Je respire l'odeur d'une rose, et aussitôt des souvenirs confus d'enfance me reviennent à la mémoire... ces souvenirs n'ont point été évoqués par le parfum de la rose: je les respire dans l'odeur même” (BERGSON 1993, 21).

Briefly put, the structure of the logic of *basho* that was framed in 1926 may be put as follows: Plato's notion of *khora* (χώρα) led Nishida to the term *basho*. The *khora* is defined as a receptacle of the Idea or the "intelligible form" (BRISSEON 1992, 17) in which the sensible comes into being (BRISSEON 1998, 1421). In Nishida's interpretation, the *khora* is only the "matter" (NKZ 12:16), while his *basho* is the "field of consciousness" (意識野) in which we reflect our thinking when we think (NKZ 4: 210). Furthermore, *basho* is something in which the whole of consciousness, including intellect, emotion, and will (知情意) takes place (223-4).

The logical basis of *basho* lies in a reinterpretation of Aristotle's logic. His concept of substratum (ὑποκειμενον; 基体) hinted at the opening of a novel direction for Nishida, who quotes Aristotle:

Now the substratum is that of which the others are predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else. (NKZ 4: 95)⁷

Nishida interprets this reality as "what becomes the subject of judgment but not the predicate," or as "what is infinitely determined" but has been turned into "what becomes infinitely predicate but is not a subject." The logical form in Aristotle's logic sees that "the subject is the predicate," in contrast to which Nishida proposes that "the subject is *within* the predicate" (主語が述語に於てある). Thus "the *basho* of 'being located'" (に於てある場所) (NKZ 4: 218) is Nishida's attempt at a new perspective from which to solve the problem of the opposition between subject and object, or the individual and the universal. Furthermore, a perspective from which "the subject is within the predicate" introduces the immediacy of the relation between subject and object, or the individual and the universal. In other words, the universal that is immediately given determines itself. At the same time, the individual appears and knowledge is established. Different kinds of knowledge and judgment lie within the predicate or the universal. Therefore, it is "the *basho* of 'being located,'" namely the "enveloping" (包む) (216) attribute, that characterizes *basho*. Intellect, emotion, and will are all situated there.

The worlds of various objects of knowledge are classified according to the meaning of each stage within the *basho*. The stratification of *basho*

7. Nishida appears to refer to a translation in English, but does not indicate its source.

describes a diverse range of activities of consciousness and will, transcending consciousness from the most abstract stratum to the most concrete. This was argued in Nishida's next work, *The Self-Awakened System of Universals* (『一般者の自覚的体系』) in 1930. There the logic of *basho* is structured broadly into three stratifications: (1) the natural world, (2) the world of consciousness, and (3) the intelligible world. The natural world is the world of being (*u* 有) and conceptualization. The world of consciousness is that of non-being (*mu* 無) and self-awakening (*jikaku* 自覚). *Jikaku* is one of Nishida's key concepts and makes up the core of the theory of knowledge in the logic of *basho*. His basic formula is “the self reflects itself within itself” (自己が自己に於て自己を映す) (NKZ 5: 415). “Reflect” is often replaced by “see” (見る), but both imply “intuition” (直観), the ultimate in self-reflection. As consciousness deepens, the self seeing itself completely within itself attains to “absolute nothingness” in which the self sees itself by transcending intellect and consciousness. This is the intelligible world that is situated at the deepest stage of absolute nothingness.

Although the inner world is no doubt far more complex and nuanced, my interest here in “form without form” or “emotion” relates directly to the intelligible and sensible worlds of *basho*. To begin with, the location of intellect, emotion, and will in *basho* are illuminated. The intellect functions within “the natural world” as well as within “the world of consciousness,” and in addition forms part of “the intelligible world.” Just where it functions depends on the object of activity; if it is relative to the intellect in the intelligible world, then it is considered to be intellect. Emotion, which is mainly taken account of in art, is observed only in the intelligible world (279). The will, which is treated in the domain of morality, is assigned to the intelligible world. It occupies the deepest stratum, transcending the activities of consciousness in *basho*. The will supports the activities of consciousness, whereas absolute nothingness supports the will (464–81).

To put it another way, Nishida stratifies the intelligible world into intellectual intuition, emotional intuition, and volitional intuition; perceptive intuition is also classified in this intelligible world. Intuition is brought about by a psychological concentration that rejects the distinction between subject and object. To take an example that Nishida highlights,

when an alpinist climbs a rocky cliff or a musician plays a piece after long hours of training, their mental state is one of intuition. Nishida does not distinguish qualitatively between the perception that everyone can experience in daily life and the intuition of the artist or religious person that results from particular discipline. The only difference is the depth of the experience (NKZ I: II–I2).

In light of the above explanation, it should be clear that for Nishida the idea of emotional intuition corresponds to the idea of “seeing the form without form.” The idea of *basho* offers an infinitely deep stratification in which the worlds of knowing appear in their different forms. Intellectual knowledge is conceptualized, while the self forgetting itself, as well as the object, become the activity of consciousness itself and intuitive knowledge. The true significance of the infinite quality of the *basho* lies in the “content of the emotional self,” because it is in the world of the objects of emotion and will that we encounter something that can never be attained by mere intellectual reflection (NKZ 5: 279). In this sense, intellectual knowledge is finite.

The idea of the contradictory “form without form” could not be sustained without a foundation in an absolute nothingness that is perfectly intelligible. At the same time, this absolute nothingness conceals itself at its most basic level. Emotion is excellent at sniffing out forms within an infinitely formless source, and emotions do not deceive. As Nishida states, “The emotional self is a shadow of the intelligible self” (279). The intelligible self as absolute nothingness becomes real when it sings of “cherry blossoms glowing in the morning sun.” This is not so far from the description of Zen enlightenment as “the willows are green, the blossoms are red” (柳は緑に花は紅) (NKZ 7: 450. DILWORTH: 34).

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