

The Kyoto School after 1950: The Problem of Its Unity and Methodology

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Abstract: The Kyoto School (*Kyōto-gakuha*) is a group of Japanese thinkers who developed original philosophical theories inspired both by Western philosophy and the philosophy of East Asia, especially by Mahāyāna Buddhism and Daoism. As is reflected in the name of the School, its founding members were associated with Kyoto University. The Kyoto School originator, Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), did not think of himself as a founder of any school and always encouraged independent thinking in his students. In the beginning, the so-called Kyoto School philosophers studied and taught at Kyoto University, they developed their thinking under the influence of Nishida as well as in dialogue and debate with him and with one another. However, after 1964, when Nishitani Keiji, Nishida's student, retired from the Chair of Philosophy of Religion, Kyoto University has ceased to be the main place of Kyoto School philosophers' activity. The aim of this paper is to prove that after 1950 we should understand the Kyoto School mainly as a specific theoretical frame and methodological approach. All thinkers branded as "Kyoto School philosophers" studied Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially Zen and Shin (True Pure Land) schools, in a non-dogmatic and non-sectarian manner. One of the characteristic methodologies of the Kyoto School is "selective identification," by which I mean explaining Buddhist concepts using selected Western terms or theories but taking them out of their original context. Another method of the Kyoto School philosophers is to develop Western philosophical theories in a new direction (sometimes quite unexpected by Western philosophers) by confronting them with the Buddhist worldview.

Key words: Kyoto School, Nishida Kitarō, absolute nothingness, overcoming modernity, Mahāyāna Buddhism

1. Introduction

The Kyoto School (*Kyōto-gakuha*) is a group of Japanese thinkers who developed original philosophical theories inspired both by Western philosophy and the philosophy of East Asia, especially by Mahāyāna Buddhism and Daoism. Initially, Kyoto School philosophers studied and taught at Kyoto University and developed

their thinking under the influence of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) as well as in dialogue and debate with him and with one another.¹

The following criteria roughly characterize the features of the Kyoto School:

1. Teaching at Kyoto University and/or being related to Nishida in some intellectual way.
2. Sharing some basic assumptions about using East Asian thought (mainly Mahāyāna Buddhism) in the framework of the Western philosophical tradition.
3. Introducing and rationally investigating the meaning of “absolute nothingness” and its importance in the history of philosophical debate.
4. Expanding on the philosophical vocabulary introduced by Nishida.
5. An ambivalent attitude towards Western modernity (or towards modernization as Westernization).

It was Tosaka Jun (1900–1945)² who first time used the designation “the Kyoto School,” because he wanted to draw attention to the fact that the pioneering work of the celebrated Nishida Kitarō was being advanced in no less creative form by his principal student, Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), who succeeded Nishida in the Chair of Philosophy at the Kyoto Imperial University. Tosaka, who was Tanabe’s student, felt that the expression “Nishida’s philosophy” did not do justice to Tanabe and Nishida’s other followers.³

There are many polemics regarding the membership of the Kyoto School but usually the following philosophers are mentioned, among others: Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), Hisamatsu Shin’ichi (1889–1980), Kōsaka Masaaki (1900–1969), Kōyama Iwao (1905–1993), Shimomura Toratarō (1900–1925), Suzuki Shigetaka (1907–1988), Takeuchi Yoshinori (1913–2002), Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019), Tsujimura Kōichi (1922–2010).

Since Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) and Tosaka Jun both turned to Marxism they are excluded from the Kyoto School by some researchers but sometimes they are regarded as members of the “left wing” of this school.

¹ J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu 2001, p. 5.

² Tosaka was teaching at Hōsei University but he was removed from this post and imprisoned because of his activity in the socialist movement. He died in prison in 1945.

³ J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 4.

Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960)⁴ and Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941),⁵ who taught philosophy and ethics at Kyoto University for some time, are usually treated as peripheral to the Kyoto School. They both were brought to Kyoto University by Nishida and both developed philosophies that were more or less influenced by Nishida's thought. According to James W. Heisig, their thought and activities "remained too independent to count them among the inner circle of the school."⁶ Robert Carter does not agree with Heisig and treats Watsuji, who also wrote about "absolute nothingness," as a very important representative of the Kyoto School together with Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani. Heisig points out that the inclusion of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi in the Kyoto School seems to be the doing of his student, Abe Masao (1915–2006), who started to be regarded as "the leading representative" of the group.⁷ Abe, a student of both Hisamatsu and Nishitani, was not related to Kyoto University (he taught at the Educational University in Nara), but no one can deny that during the 1980s the Kyoto School enjoyed its greatest blossoming in the West mainly due to the efforts of Abe, who lectured in the USA. A collection of essays entitled *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* published in 1982 included not only pieces by Hisamatsu and Abe but also by D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), who did not teach at Kyoto University. Suzuki maintained a long personal relationship with Nishida since their days as schoolmates and helped introduce Nishida to the practice of Zen.⁸ They kept in touch all their lives and shared the same interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The problem with Suzuki is that generally he refused to write about philosophy and stated that "to understand Zen one must abandon all he has acquired by way of conceptual knowledge and stand before it stripped of every bit of the intellection he has patiently accumulated around him."⁹ Suzuki warned that any philosophy of Zen will be nothing more than a castle in the sand. This statement, however, appears to be contradicted by what Suzuki himself said in his article *The Philosophy of*

⁴ Watsuji graduated from Tokyo Imperial University. He was invited by Nishida to teach ethics at Kyoto University from 1925 until he was appointed professor at Tokyo Imperial University in 1934.

⁵ Kuki graduated from Tokyo Imperial University and started to teach at Kyoto University in 1929 after his stay in Europe where he had studied under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

⁶ R.E. Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*, Suny Press, New York 2013, p. 10.

⁷ M. Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 1995, p. 122.

⁸ M. Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2002, p. 49.

⁹ D.T. Suzuki, *A Reply to Van Meter Ames*, "Philosophy East and West" 1956, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 349.

Zen.¹⁰ The problem lies in the meaning of the phrase “to understand Zen.” When Suzuki rejects rational thinking, he means that it is an obstacle on the way to the experience of Enlightenment. Of course, he is right to claim that only direct insight, and not rational discourse, is the path to the Enlightenment experience – all true Zen masters, past and present, would agree with this conclusion. Yet as *Zen* is also a form of human expression, it is meant to be communicated and articulated in concepts and notions that belong to the so-called rational sphere. Suzuki was aware of the unavoidability of a philosophical aspect in *Zen*, as these words of his demonstrate: “The conceptualization of *Zen* is inevitable; *Zen* must have its philosophy. The only caution is not to identify *Zen* with a system of philosophy, for *Zen* is infinitely more than that.”¹¹ Although Suzuki calls the philosophy of *Zen* “the philosophy of ‘emptiness,’”¹² he was first of all a *Zen* teacher concerned with leading people to the experience of Enlightenment itself and his method can be labelled as “Missionary *Zen*.” In my opinion Suzuki’s writings on “the conceptualization of *Zen*” should be included in the Kyoto School heritage.

Other recent affiliates of the Kyoto School, who could be seen as belonging to its fourth generation, include Ōhashi Ryōsuke, Hase Shōtō, Horio Tsutomu, Ōmine Akira, Fujita Masakatsu, Mori Tetsurō, Hanaoka (Kawamura) Eiko, Matsumura Hideo, Nakaoka Narifumi, Okada Katsuaki, and Keta Masako.

Fujita Masakatsu points out that “there are almost no works [in Japan – A.K.] on the Kyoto School, which define its scope and characteristics [...] while in the United States and Europe there is much interest not only in particular representatives of the Kyoto School but also in the philosophical school itself.”¹³ One of the reasons could be the fact that the Kyoto School “has never had any competing philosophical schools and therefore has never bothered to define its own identity.”¹⁴

¹⁰ D.T. Suzuki, *The Philosophy of Zen*, “Philosophy East and West” 1951, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 2–15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹² “Emptiness” (*kū*) and “absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu*) are synonyms in the Kyoto School writings.

¹³ M. Fujita, *Kyōto gakuga no tetsugaku* [The Philosophy of the Kyoto School], Shōwadō, Kyōto 2001, p. i. (transl. A.K.).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

2. Is Kyoto School in Kyoto?

After 1964, when Nishitani Keiji, who was one of Nishida's students, retired from the Chair of Philosophy of Religion, Kyoto University is no longer the main place of the Kyoto School philosophers' activity.

It should be noted that the Department of Philosophy at Kyoto University is proud of the heritage of the Kyoto School, which can be testified by the following introduction on its website:

Before World War II the department, which became known as the Kyoto School of Philosophy, flourished under Professors Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime. However, when Kōyama Iwao was expelled from office following the war, an academic shift took place in the department.

[...]

Detailed information on the history of the department can be found in Kyoto University's Clock Tower Centennial Hall. There, Nishida and Tanabe's philosophical contributions, as well as documents showing the expulsion of the Kyoto School philosophers from public office, are displayed. [...]

A look at the various research areas our staff members in the department have focused on over the last 30 years shows that analytic philosophy was done in parallel with research relating to classical modern philosophy such as 17th century epistemology and metaphysics, British empiricism, Leibniz, Kant, German Idealism, Heidegger, and American pragmatism. At its heart, the department strives to tackle contemporary philosophical problems based on accurate and extensive knowledge of classical philosophy.

[...]

To sum up, Kyoto University's Philosophy Department encourages students to acquire a deep understanding of the history of the philosophy gained through access to information in multiple languages, and with an open mind to other academic and ideological traditions, including those of science. It is only after one has successfully acquired these skills that it is possible to build one's philosophical position. It is this attitude that has persevered in the department since the era of Nishida and Tanabe, and that continues to be passed down to students today.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Studying Philosophy in Kyoto*, The Department of Philosophy, Kyoto University, URL: http://www.philosophy.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en_home/en_history/ (accessed 5.08.2022).

The creation of the Department of the History of Japanese Philosophy, in 1998, at Kyoto University, under the direction of Fujita Masakatsu, a specialist in the Kyoto School, makes evident that the tradition of this school is still important at this university.

One can say that there is more than one specific place associated with the Kyoto School. The Kokoro Research Center (Kokoro means “the Self”)¹⁶ at Kyoto University can be regarded as inspired in some aspects by the focus on the Self (human cognition and consciousness) in the Kyoto School, but its methodology is more diverse: “from neuro and cognitive science to Buddhist studies, from cultural and social psychology to clinical psychology, from aesthetics to public policy.”¹⁷ This is proof that Buddhist studies are treated at Kyoto University not simply as a part of religious studies but in the context of the philosophical analysis of the Self.

The groups that have formed among students of Nishida and Tanabe can be regarded in a sense as a continuation of the Kyoto School. The first of the “Nishida Kitarō Commemorative Lectures” was delivered by D.T. Suzuki in 1945, the year of Nishida’s death. The following year, some of Nishida’s students and interested scholars formed a group to preserve their teacher’s memory and perform memorial service for him each year. The group called itself “Sunshinkai” (Society of Inch-Mind – after Nishida’s lay Buddhist name) and took over the responsibility of hosting the annual commemorative lectures and discussions, which continue to this day.

Nishitani Keiji after his retirement from Kyoto University in 1965 took over as chief editor of “The Eastern Buddhist,” a journal published by Ōtani University (Pure Land Buddhism) in Kyoto at which D.T. Suzuki had served as editor during its formative years. Until 1999 the journal regularly published translations of works of the Kyoto School members and articles about the philosophy of Nishida, Tanabe, or Nishitani, so at that time it could be called “the journal of the Kyoto School.”

In 1980 the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya held the first post-war conference in Japan with Nishitani and others associated with the Kyoto School, and the same year it began publishing English translations of

¹⁶ *Kokoro* in modern Japanese means “heart” but as a Buddhist term it means total human consciousness including both mind and heart (emotions).

¹⁷ *Kokoro Research Center*, Kyoto University, URL: <https://www.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/research/fields/centers/kokoro-research-center> (accessed 5.08.2022).

the Kyoto School's original works. A seven-volume series of essays on the Kyoto School and Japanese philosophy was published in this institute (2004–2010). So Nagoya can also be regarded as an important centre that propagates the Kyoto School philosophy.

However, Nagoya was not the only place where conferences on the Kyoto School were organized. Starting in 1983, a series of international conferences known as the Kyoto Zen Symposia were organized by Abbot Hirata Seikō of Tenryūji Temple in Kyoto in collaboration with a team of local scholars headed by Nishitani Keiji and after his death by Ueda Shizuteru. Scholars from abroad were also invited and a third of published articles after such conferences were devoted to the Kyoto School.

In 2002 the Nishida Kitarō Museum of Philosophy and its Research Center (Kahoku, Ishikawa prefecture) were established. This is where the Nishida Philosophy Association was founded in 2003.

One could conclude that the name “the Kyoto School” is not adequate anymore but it is recognized worldwide so it would be difficult to change it. I agree with Bret W. Davis that the most fundamental of the Kyoto School philosophers' shared and disputed concepts is that of “absolute nothingness,” “a notion that has, in fact, most often been used as a point of reference for defining the school.”¹⁸ Therefore, it might be that the name “the School of Absolute Nothingness” would be more adequate nowadays.

3. The Kyoto School and Japanese Imperialism and Nationalism

Many foreign researchers studying the Kyoto School have overlooked the political implications of their thought, especially during World War II.¹⁹ There is no doubt that Nishida supported the idea of a nation-state and Japan's mission as the leader of East Asia. However, he tried to prove that the spirit of Japan is not a spirit of imperialism that aims to suppress other countries. “One country tries to subjugate others, this is imperialism. If this country is powerful, it is able to

¹⁸ B.W. Davis, *The Kyoto School*, in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. N. Zalta, U. Nodelman, URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/> (accessed 5.08.2022).

¹⁹ J.W. Heisig, J. Maraldo, *Editors' Introduction*, in: *Rude Awakenings, Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, eds. J.W. Heisig, J. Maraldo, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 1994, p. vii.

maintain peace for a while, but this leads to the enslavement of other nations, and this means the loss of humanity. You cannot keep power indefinitely in this way, resistance arises and war breaks out, and this leads to the collapse of culture.”²⁰ For Nishida, the nation-state should be an “ethical subjectivity,” and the primary basis of morality in the social dimension is not a duty, but a willingness to serve others, which results from readiness to dedicate oneself to the community.²¹ In Nishida’s vision of a multicultural world, neither the West would subsume the East nor vice versa – he believed that “various cultures, while maintaining their own individual standpoints, would develop themselves through the mediation of the world.”²²

Nishida did not question the value of the nation-state, because in his opinion, from the 19th century, it was the nation-state that became the main factor of historical and social progress.²³ He believed that Japan’s destined world-historical role was to bring new order to East Asia, but it should not be interpreted as the expression of imperialism and chauvinism. One should not forget that the idea that a particular nation may be the bearer of a noble mission of civilization or liberation, and that, therefore, its actions in history serve a higher purpose, is often found in world history, unfortunately often mainly as an expression of idealistic wishful thinking.

After World War II, Nishida was criticized for his nationalist views. It cannot be said that Nishida completely cut himself off from politics, as he believed that intellectuals should try to influence the government. In 1933, he re-established contacts with his former protégé Konoe Ayamaro (1891–1945),²⁴ who was Prime Minister of Japan in 1937–1939 and 1940–1941. At the request of a friend, Kido Kōichi (1889–1977), who became Minister of Education, Nishida agreed to enter

²⁰ K. Nishida, *Nihon bunka no mondai* [Reflections on the Culture of Japan], in: *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [The Collection of Nishida Kitarō’s Works], ed. Y. Abe, Vol. 12, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1979, p. 373. Unless stated otherwise, all translations of Japanese quotations are my own.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

²² K. Nishida, *Keijijōgakuteki tachiba kara mita Tōzai kodai no bunka keitai* [The Patterns of Ancient East and West Cultures as Seen from a Metaphysical Perspective], in: *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [The Collection of Nishida Kitarō’s Works], ed. Y. Abe, Vol. 7, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1979, pp. 452–453.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

²⁴ Nishida helped young Konoe Ayamaro transfer from Tokyo Imperial University to the Law Faculty of Kyoto University. After the war, Konoe Ayamaro was declared a war criminal by the Tokyo Tribunal but he did not recognize the accusations and committed suicide in prison as a sign of protest according to samurai tradition.

the Board of Consultants of the Ministry of Education, although he had refused many times before. During this period, however, Nishida was severely criticized by ultranationalists, for example, in 1938 by Minoda Muneki (1894–1946) for demanding the liberalization of educational policy. Ultranationalists were also disturbed by the activities of the Shōwa Era Scientific Society (Shōwa Kenkyūkai), as they considered its message inconsistent with the national spirit. Nishida was actively involved in the founding of this association, which, due to its ties to the Konoe Ayamaro government, was often criticized by post-war historians as nationalist and even fascist. It should be noted, however, that the Shōwa Era Scientific Society was supposed to be a counterbalance to the far right, as the society's members shared Nishida's view that Japan cannot isolate itself from the world by looking only at its own tradition. Nishida's statement that the word "worldly" (*sekaiteki*) "is now considered a disgusting phrase that a decent man should not use"²⁵ indicates the climax of the nationalist hysteria that prevailed in Japan at the time.

Nishida had great respect for the imperial family, but he discussed its merits in a different context than official proponents of "national structure" (*kokutai*). When the imperial house donated a significant amount from its private resources to the development of education, Nishida wrote that "the unbroken imperial line is a symbol of mercy, altruism, and partnership."²⁶ During a public speech in Tokyo's Hibiya Park in 1937, he proclaimed that in Japan the imperial family was the foundation of Japanese national identity, but he also emphasized that Japan needed contact with the world for its spiritual growth and development of individualism and liberalism, concepts criticized at the time as Western ideas that threatened traditional Japanese morality. In a 1941 speech delivered directly to the emperor, he stated that: "Any totalitarian system that negates outright the role of the individual is but an anachronism."²⁷ He was not arrested only because he had influential sympathizers within the moderate ranks of the government who protected him.

²⁵ K. Nishida, *Shokan 1* [Letters 1], in: *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [The Collection of Nishida Kitarō's Works], ed. Y. Abe, Vol. 19, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1979, p. 86.

²⁶ M. Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 168.

²⁷ K. Nishida, *Rekishi tetsugaku ni tsuite* [On the Philosophy of History], in: *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [The Collection of Nishida Kitarō's Works], ed. Y. Abe, Vol. 12, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1979, p. 271.

Nishida's ideas were carried forth into even more controversial political engagements by his students, such as Nishitani Keiji, Kōyama Iwao, Kōsaka Masaaki, Suzuki Shigetaka, and to a lesser extent Shimomura Toratarō. Nishitani affirmed that the war was imperative to establish the supreme ideal of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. After the war, he was accused of having supported the wartime government and in July 1946 he was banned from holding any public position by the United States Occupation authorities. In 1952 Nishitani was reinstated to his post as the head of the Chair of Philosophy of Religion at Kyoto University. According to Heisig, "Nishitani brought his considerable learning and youthful idealism to bear on the political ideology of the day, only to be swept along in currents much stronger than he had prepared for."²⁸ Tanabe Hajime, who retired about five months before the end of the war in 1945, was labelled "a racist," "a Nazi" and "a Fascist."²⁹ In 1946 Tanabe started to develop his theory of "philosophy as Metanoetics (beyond reasoning)" being influenced by the Pure Land Buddhist notion of "Other Power,"³⁰ which is related also to his personal regrets. In 1951, he wrote: "But as the tensions of World War II grew even more fierce and with it the regulation of thinking, weak-willed as I was, I found myself unable to resist and could not but yield to some degree to the prevalent mood, which is a shame deeper than I can bear. [...] I can only lower my head and earnestly lament my sin."³¹

It should be noted that many philosophers of the Kyoto School were criticized by the right-wing scholars and politicians for not supporting Japan's turn to militarism and rightist ideology, and immediately after the war for having supported it.³² Heisig does not agree with the conclusion that anything approaching or supporting the imperialistic ideology of wartime Japan belongs to the fundamental inspiration of the Kyoto School philosophers' thought. "Insofar as any of them

²⁸ J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁹ R.E. Carter, *The Kyoto School*, op. cit., p. 66.

³⁰ In Pure Land Buddhism, the idea of "Other Power" (*tariki*) is related to Buddha Amida (Sanskrit: Amitabha), who made a vow that all who call upon him will be reborn in his Pure Land (Buddhist paradise), where everybody will be able to attain Enlightenment. Thus conceived "Other Power" is inseparable from Great Mercy.

³¹ J.W. Heisig, *The "Self That Is Not-a-Self": Tanabe's Dialectics of Self-Awareness*, in: *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime: The Metanoetic Imperative*, eds. T. Unno, J.W. Heisig, Asian Humanities Press, Berkeley, CA, 1990, p. 284.

³² R.E. Carter, *The Kyoto School*, op. cit., p. 94.

did willingly add support, it may be considered an aberration from their own intellectual goals.”³³

In my opinion, not only Nishitani or Tanabe but also Nishida believed in the uniqueness of Japanese culture and its mission in world history. They were concerned with the imperialistic presence of Western powers in Asia, and they certainly did not want Japan to become a colony. The opening to the world after a long time of isolation, the forced modernization in Western style, and all historical circumstances were also the source of the preoccupation with the Japanese identity and nationalism – this was the atmosphere in which the Kyoto School philosophers lived and thought. However, I agree with Heisig that the philosophy of the Kyoto School should not be reduced to the rationale for Japan’s expansion in East Asia.

Only in the past few decades the reputation of the Kyoto School has been significantly rehabilitated in Japan, due to a general reaffirmation of cultural identity and a new debate on “Japanese uniqueness,” as well as the positive attention the School has received from Western scholars.

4. Overcoming Modernity (*kindai no chōkoku*)

In July 1942, a group of Japanese intellectuals (including some representatives of the Kyoto School, such as Nishitani Keiji and Kōyama Iwao) was brought together by the magazine “Literary World” (“Bungakukai”) as part of a symposium on modern Western civilization and its reception in Japan. The papers and discussions were published under the title *Overcoming Modernity*.³⁴ At that time the idea of overcoming modernity developed in conjunction with their wartime political theories, which typically saw the nation of Japan as playing a key role in the historical movement through and beyond Western modernity. This problem was also related to their critique of the contradictions and hypocrisies of Western imperialism.

After the war, the idea of “overcoming modernity” has proven to be one of the stimulating theories of the Kyoto School. In 1997 the international conference

³³ J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 6.

³⁴ R. Minamoto, *The Symposium on “Overcoming Modernity”*, in: *Rude Awakenings, Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, eds. J.W. Heisig, J. Maraldo, University of Hawai‘i Press, Honolulu 1994, p. 197.

“Logique de lieu at dépassement de la modernité” (The Logic of Topos and Overcoming of Modernity) was organized in Paris by Agustin Berque and scholars from the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto as part of a larger project (1996–1998) on this subject. The following problems were discussed:

- Japanese perspective as crucial to debates on postmodernism in philosophy and post-colonialism in cultural studies;
- the critical stance on modernization as Westernization;
- the need for a critical and creative retrieval of the traditions of the East, which would enable the new religious and philosophical theories to move through and beyond the limits and problems of Western modernity.

The Kyoto School philosophers did not nostalgically plea for a return to a pre-modern age but they believed that creatively appropriated selected elements of Japanese spiritual tradition should be combined with the best of what Japan could learn from the West. Especially important was the problem of the redefinition of the Self as No-Self (Jap. *muga*; Sanskr. *anātman*) in the Buddhist context of overcoming subject–object dualism, since such theories could lead to a more harmonious vision of the co-existence of all elements in the universe (including the co-existence of humankind and nature), than the philosophical paradigms of a subject alienated from the world of objects of cognition.

5. The “Originality” of the Kyoto School

James W. Heisig’s rather ambivalent approach to the Kyoto School has become very influential among Western researchers. On the one hand, Heisig claims that “[i]n the Kyoto school we have the making of a school of thought able to stand shoulder to shoulder with major schools and currents of philosophy in the west.”³⁵ On the other hand, he regards the work of the Kyoto School as a “derivative philosophy.”³⁶ “In the context of Western philosophy, the Kyoto philosophers need to be seen as a derivative school of thought. None of them represents the

³⁵ J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

kind of revolutionary originality we associate with the thinkers who were most influential on them: Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, James, and Heidegger.”³⁷

According to Heisig, the Kyoto philosophers are Eastern and Buddhist but their aim and context are neither Eastern nor Buddhist. “To see their non-Christian and non-western elements as a kind of oriental spice to enliven certain questions on the menu of western philosophy might be the simplest way to open one’s mind to their writing.”³⁸ Such an approach to the Kyoto School justifies, in Heisig’s opinion, the omission of the “oriental spice,” that is, passages on Zen, Pure Land, Kegon, and Tendai ideas that the Kyoto School philosophers used to explain their reinterpretation of some Western philosophical concepts. Heisig decided to keep his book within the confines of Western philosophical thought since he believed it is there that Kyoto School philosophers find their place more than in the circles of Buddhist scholarship.³⁹

I agree that the philosophy of the Kyoto School should not be reduced to “the circles of Buddhist scholarship,” but, in my opinion, it is a grave mistake to ignore or diminish the importance of the influence of Eastern philosophy in their writings. The original meaning of words can be lost if they are taken out of their original context. It seems to me that Heisig and many other Western scholars do not understand that the Kyoto School philosophers often use a methodology of what I call “selective identification.” By this method I mean a rather instrumental usage of selected Western concepts – they are taken out of the original context to explain a theory that is grounded in Eastern philosophy. That is why Nishida quotes so many Western thinkers, treating their theories rather superficially. William James’s notion of “pure experience” was for him only a useful tool to start a discourse on Mahāyāna Buddhism’s idea of non-dualism (negation of subject–object dualism). Therefore it is a misunderstanding to look for a coherent presentation of James’ thought in Nishida’s writings, as Heisig does in his reviews of Ueda Shizuteru’s work on Nishida. Heisig states that “[t]he idea of pure experience as we find it in James’s essay on *The Stream of Consciousness* when compared with Nishida’s treatment in *A Study of Good*, seems to oblige the conclusion that either Nishida never finished reading James or that he did not really get what

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

James was saying.”⁴⁰ I would rather say that Nishida simply took from James what suited his discourse on Buddhist non-dualism and did not mind the rest.

By using the “selective identification” methodology the Kyoto School philosophers introduce various Western theories only to show that they can be interpreted in a different way in the Buddhist context or can be developed in a new (Buddhist) direction. For instance, Abe Masao reinterprets some elements of the Christian doctrine (such as *kenosis*) in a Buddhist context. For him, the universal religious experience as the foundation of interreligious dialogue has nothing to do with the idea of God as the supreme, transcendent, personal being, but it has much in common with the notion of No-Self in Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁴¹ Another example is Nishitani Keiji’s study of nihilism, which, according to him, is now an overwhelming reality in the modern world. Nishitani concludes that “only Buddhist thinking can purely reverse our nihilism by calling forth the totality of Śūnyatā [Sanskrit term meaning: “emptiness,” it is a synonym of “absolute nothingness” – A.K.].”⁴²

According to Carter “absolute nothingness” cannot be apprehended directly, but only indirectly as the unseen “lining” of all things. Absolute nothingness is never itself a form, a being, but is always formless and known only through the formed beings that are manifestations of it.⁴³ Such interpretation may be called “Western” because it is close to Plotinus’s idea of the One that transcends all beings, and is not itself a being, precisely because all beings are its manifestation. I think that such an interpretation is mistaken because I agree with Suzuki Daisetsu’s opinion that Nishida’s vision of the Self as the absolutely contradictory self-identity of “one” and “many” has much in common with the teaching of *The Garland Sutra*, which describes the Enlightenment of Buddha Gautama as the state in which “one is all and all is one.” “The topos of absolute nothingness” is a paradoxical state, in which all individual entities are unique and separated, and yet they are “one.” All elements are mutually unhindered and interfused – a state that cannot be grasped as an object separated from the subject of cog-

⁴⁰ J.W. Heisig, *Ueda Shizuteru, Nishida Kitarō: Ningen no shōgai to iu koto* [Ueda Shizuteru, Nishida Kitarō: *On What We Call Life*], “Japanese Journal of Religious Studies” 1997, Vol. 24, No. 1–2, p. 201.

⁴¹ M. Abe, *Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata*, in: *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, eds. J.B. Cobb Jr., C. Ives, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, 2005, pp. 10–11.

⁴² J. Shore, *Abe Masao’s Legacy: Awakening to Reality through the Death of Ego and Providing Spiritual Ground for the Modern World*, “The Eastern Buddhist” 1998, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1998, p. 295.

⁴³ R.E. Carter, *The Kyoto School*, op. cit., p. 155.

niton. “Many [all elements – A.K.] remain many, and yet many are one; one remains one, yet one is many.”⁴⁴ Nishida stressed that such a vision of reality has nothing to do with mysticism. He was aware that some Western philosophers condemned mysticism because it was not directly confirmable through ordinary sense perception, and particularly because it often challenged the teachings of the orthodox religions. Many mystics claimed that it is a knowledge of the hearts and not of the minds, more feeling than a thought, and yet it is claimed to have noetic value – that is, value as a kind of knowledge.⁴⁵ Nishida’s critics argued that his deliberations on overcoming the dualism of subject and object of cognition were irrational or mystical, and therefore he started to defend his “scientific attitude” by referring to results of quantum mechanics experiments. He saw them as bringing forth scientific proof that a subject is not an independent observer, separate from the object of cognition. Nishida wrote many essays on the philosophy of modern physics.⁴⁶

I agree with Heisig that the Kyoto School philosophers have positioned themselves in a place as unfamiliar to the Eastern mind as it is to the Western. However, it does not mean that one should ignore all Eastern elements in the Kyoto School philosophy, regarding them as “oriental spice.” For instance, Nishida’s reinterpretation of Shinran’s thought from the perspective of reality as absolute contradictory self-identity may be astonishing to Pure Land Buddhists, but they are able to compare Nishida’s redefinition of Shinran’s crucial terms with traditional interpretation.

In my opinion, Eastern philosophy is the starting point of the Kyoto School philosophers’ analysis, and so without knowing such starting point one cannot understand what they continue and what they abandon. Therefore, I do not agree with Heisig that a lack of background in the intellectual tradition of the East is not a major obstacle to understanding the rather peculiar language of the Kyoto philosophers.

⁴⁴ K. Nishida, *Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* [The Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity], in: *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [The Collection of Nishida Kitarō’s Works], ed. Y. Abe, Vol. 9, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1979, p. 170.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴⁶ For more about this problem, see A. Kozyra, *Nishida Kitarō’s Philosophy of Absolute Nothingness (Zettaimu no tetsugaku) and Modern Theoretical Physics*, “Philosophy East and West” 2018, Vol. 68, No. 2, pp. 73–85.

Heisig points out that “Nishida is clearly the least indebted to eastern sources,”⁴⁷ but I think that this is not true in the case of his so-called “last writings,” where he presented his philosophy of “absolute nothingness.” The problem is that Nishida does not bother to introduce exhaustively philosophical theories of any pre-modern Eastern thinker, because for him this is the task of a historian of philosophy, not a philosopher par excellence.

6. The Lack of Sharp Separation between Philosophy and Religion in the Kyoto School

Robert Carter emphasizes that religion in Japan is not only about belief but mainly about consciousness transformation.⁴⁸ He should rather say – Japanese Buddhism is about consciousness transformation because Shinto is mainly a religion of worldly benefits due to the grace of gods and of harmony with nature considered to be divine.

According to Carter, “For the Japanese, religion is not a matter of faith or reason, belief or dogma, but of experience, the sort of experience that is truly transformative, the kind that can truly be said to cause one to see oneself and the world differently.”⁴⁹ For Carter, the Kyoto School philosophers are not content with a web of analysis and rigorous thinking if it does not transform the individual. The Western emphasis on reason alone tended to make philosophy “a purely cerebral affair,” while the starting point of the Japanese was that knowledge is also an experimental affair that can be achieved and honed through practice rather than reason alone.⁵⁰ For Carter, the knowledge gained through practice is achieved through the use of the body, by which he means also meditational practice. He also argues that the Kyoto School philosophers inquire into the culture in its many forms, religious and nonreligious, to abstract from them a coherent, philosophically rigorous account that would stand the test of criticism. “It is always more than an intellectual activity, and yet, unlike religion, there is no limit as to what is to be investigated and no prescribed texts or rules to be followed in one’s inquiries except to be true to the evidence. Even reason, while important,

⁴⁷ J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 20.

⁴⁸ R.E. Carter, *The Kyoto School*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

is not the final arbiter of truth, for truth is to be found in experience, as well.”⁵¹ Carter agrees with Heisig that the philosophy of the Kyoto School is an ultimately serious and vital activity; it seeks the transformation of awareness.⁵² Heisig points out that “for Kyoto philosophers, thinking either transforms the way we look at the things of life, or it is not thinking in the fullest sense of the world.”⁵³ For Heisig, the transformation of awareness of the things of life erases the need for distinguishing between philosophy and religion as distinct modes of thought. He claims that it is the transformation of awareness that justifies specific doctrinal and historical traditions, not the other way around.⁵⁴

Both Heisig and Carter argue that the Kyoto School philosophers do not separate religion from philosophy because they think that the goal of religion in Japan is the transformation of awareness/consciousness. The following question should be asked in this context: do they mean *any possible* transformation of awareness?

Heisig quotes the following words of Takeuchi Yoshinori, a leading student of Tanabe: “Philosophy has served Buddhism as an inner principle of religion, not as an outside critic. [...] Philosophy in Buddhism is not speculation or metaphysical contemplation, but rather a metanoia of thinking, a conversion within reflective thought that signals a return to the authentic self – the no-self of *anātman* [...] It is a philosophy that transcends and overcomes the presuppositions of metaphysics.”⁵⁵

It should be noted that Heisig ignores the original meaning of the Buddhist terms Takeuchi used because he regards them as a spice added to Western philosophy. According to Heisig, “the ‘authentic self’ to which Takeuchi alludes as the goal of the religion-philosophy enterprise is less confession of faith in fundamental Buddhist teaching of ‘no-self’ than a metaphor of the concern with clarity of thought and transformation of consciousness.”⁵⁶ “The coincidence of terminology is not to be taken lightly, since it does point to the reinterpretation of a classical idea, but neither should it be made to bear the full weight of tradition surrounding the idea of *anātman*.”⁵⁷ For Heisig, the state of No-Self is

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵² J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

mere “awakening to the world as it is without the interference of utility or other preconceptions,”⁵⁸ which is in accord with his interpretation of the Kyoto School philosophy as a kind of phenomenology.

Heisig states that the Kyoto School philosophers avoided all reference to psychoanalytical theory or any connection between No-Self and abnormal or paranormal psychic states,⁵⁹ and so for him, the traditional Buddhist notion of “No-Self” is not a mystical (that is, abnormal or paranormal) psychic state. In my opinion, the reason why the Kyoto School philosophers do not treat “No-Self” as an abnormal state of mind is different – they think that the Buddhist notion of No-Self, as absolutely contradictory self-identity of a subject and all objects of cognition, is the true self and therefore is “normal.” Surely they do not think that “No-Self” means Mind that differentiates (the state of the dualism of a subject and all objects of cognition), even if it is differentiating without the interference of utility or other preconceptions.

Such a conclusion can be drawn only if one loses the true meaning of “Ordinary Mind” in Zen tradition – since nirvana (the absolute) and samsara (the relative) are not to be separated, the Enlightened Mind is in unity with all that exists (no differentiation) and at the same time the mind does not lose its sam-saric nature – it differentiates. The problem is that many scholars seem to be afraid to accept the paradoxical (or rather paradox-logical) structure of No-Self because training in Western philosophy and classical logic makes them immediately reject inner contradiction as a philosophical absurd. Heisig’s approach is an example of such interpretation – Zen “seeing things as they are” is understood as Husserl’s phenomenology spiced with Oriental/Buddhist flavour.

In my opinion, the problem of the lack of any sharp separation between philosophy and religion in the Kyoto School can be explained not only as a problem of consciousness transformation crucial to both religion and philosophy. What is most important is that according to the doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism only direct insight reaches the ultimate reality, while the abilities of reason are useful but limited. Truth in Buddhism is not a revelation, which should be believed because of religious authority; the truth is to be experienced in the act of Enlightenment, and such truth is verifiable and “repeatable” – Buddha’s experience of Enlightenment is repeated by Zen masters, and Zen masters verify their disciples’

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

Enlightenment. From such a point of view, the so-called Buddhist truth is no different from philosophical truth (or even scientific truth). It should be noted that also due to such an understanding of intuition in Buddhism, there was almost no conflict between religion and reason in pre-modern Japan.

The Kyoto School philosophers should not be regarded simply as “Eastern” philosophers, although their theoretical foundation is very often Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the search for truth, they managed to build a unique philosophical “bridge” between West and East Asia, trying to rise above any cultural, philosophical, or religious constraints.

The Kyoto School originator, Nishida Kitarō, did not think of himself as a founder of any school and always encouraged independent thinking in his students. The Kyoto School started as spontaneous academic vitality that so often emerges around great thinkers. The mentor–student relationship in the Kyoto School was for its members a fruitful occasion to discuss freely Nishida’s theories and develop them in new directions. Tanabe criticized Nishida’s philosophy as a kind of mysticism but it was important for Nishida, who answered such criticism by showing the links between the philosophy of “absolute nothingness” and modern physics.

Assuming that in the case of a philosophical school, the mentor–student relationship is more important than association with a centre, such as a university, it can be said that after 1950 in the case of the Kyoto School such necessary condition was fulfilled in many cases. For instance, Abe Masao, who died in 2016, was a student of both Nishitani Keiji and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi and maintained close contact with D.T. Suzuki during the last ten years of Suzuki’s life. However, nowadays mentor–student relations are becoming rather rare. Some Japanese philosophers who were inspired by the writing of the Kyoto School philosophers are members of associations such as Sunshinkai (Society of Inch-Mind) and regularly meet to discuss the results of their research; therefore, they may be counted as members of the Kyoto School circle. However many philosophers interested in the Kyoto School study independently and only occasionally meet at international conferences – they may be counted in the Kyoto School philosophical current.

In my opinion, after 1950 the main distinguishing characteristics of the Kyoto School are a specific theoretical frame and methodological approach of selective identification. All thinkers branded as “the Kyoto School philosophers” study Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially Zen and Shin (True Pure Land) schools,

in a non-dogmatic and non-sectarian manner. They tried to reveal what they regard as the potential hidden in traditional Buddhist philosophy but in the wider context of the search for truth and in dialogue with Western philosophy. The influence of Nishida Kitarō is also essential because many of the Kyoto School philosophers elaborated new philosophical terms and theories that can be regarded as further answers to philosophical questions he had asked – for example, Nishitani Keiji’s study of nihilism in Western and Eastern philosophy and Abe Masao’s theory of interreligious dialogue.

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