MY ENCOUNTER WITH NISHIDA'S PHILOSOPHY

James W. Heisig
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (emeritus)

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From time to time, when I am alone with my thoughts and reflecting on my years in academia, I am overwhelmed by how unexpected and fortunate my encounter with the writings of Nishida Kitarō was. I hesitate to claim that there is anything particularly instructive about my experience. But today, at the receipt of this award, seems the right time to speak freely about my good fortune in tribute to this truly unique philosopher. His place in the history of philosophy is too well established to need any further argument from me here. Rather, I should like to look back over my shoulder and talk about his place in my life.

When I was invited to come to Japan some forty-four years ago, it was to aid in the establishment of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture and help fulfill the dream of Johannes Hirschmeier, then president of Nanzan University. He was convinced that the time had come to bring Christianity closer to the religions of Japan. The basic problem, as he saw it, was that the established religions lacked the proper language to speak to one another. Simply put, he was convinced that the language of "apologetics" with which one religion defended its doctrine against "heresy" needed to be reformed to learn a second language of "dialogue" to speak to those with religious beliefs, and that this long process of reform could not begin without a solid academic base. It was in fog and uncertainty of that ideal that the Institute began.

Frankly, I was poorly prepared for the task. I found myself like an adult in a Montessori children's house who had to acquire a second education through "learning by doing." The first Director of the Institute, Jan Van Bragt, was my guide and my guardian angel as I stumbled and fumbled my way around a new language, a new culture, and a world richer in religious diversity than any I had known. Van Bragt had received his doctorate from his native Belgium and, after coming to Japan, had studied under Takeuchi Yoshinori at Kyoto University and had worked closely with Nishitani Keiji to prepare a translation of his master work on religion into English. There could hardly have been a better choice for the job of Director, and the light he brought to our pioneering efforts shines as brightly today as when he was with us.

Shortly after I had settled into my office, Van Bragt brought up the idea of editing a series of books in English to complement our Japanese publications. As a first step, he proposed that I translate a recently published work in German on Nishitani's thought as a foundation for interreligious dialogue. I through myself into the task and the following year, 1980, the book appeared. In the course of the work, I would often sit down with Van Bragt to ask for his help in understanding the ideas that were being introduced there. Although he patiently gave me the quick answers I was looking for, he recommended that I go back to the primary sources and read for myself. Not surprisingly, no sooner had I dug into Nishitani's work than I found myself drawn to the writings of Nishida. I began with his *Inquiry into the Good*. It was not at first a happy experience.

During the writing of my doctoral dissertation on the psychologist C. G. Jung's idea of God, I had read widely on the notion of God in western philosophy, focusing on modern thinkers since the Enlightenment. When I read what Nishida had to say about God, I found its style of argument curiously like the kind of thinking one would find in the nineteenth-century theosophists' version of pantheism: a mosaic of esoteric aphorisms and half-ideas stitched together with allusions from mainstream philosophy. I recognized the authors Nishida was citing—thinkers like Schopenhauer, Wundt, James, and Bergson—but I could not for the life of me follow his reasoning or identify what was the question for which he was seeking an answer. I surmised that it had something to do with achieving a "unity of consciousness" in which the mind is intuitively fully in tune with reality. He spoke of a "great intuition or at work" behind all great thought like the philosophies of Plato and Spinoza," something like the "knack" or "feel" that artisans have with their tools or musicians with their instruments. Whatever Nishida's driving intuition was, I couldn't find it. Rather than blame myself, I blamed Nishida. If, as Nishida scholars claimed, this is the work whose ideas run like a red thread throughout the rest of his writings, then I thought it best to spend my time elsewhere.

As it happened, no sooner had I finished my translation than Van Bragt approached me with another task. After some sixteen years of going over his translation of『宗教とは何か』line by line with Nishitani himself, his work had been completed. Before submitting it to the publishers, he felt that the work needed the touch of a native English hand. For months on end I labored over the task. The intensity of the work kept Nishida out of sight—but not out of mind. Each night after supper, Van Bragt would go over my revisions with me word by word. Not only did he teach me a great deal about the scholarly conscience of translation, he would also stray from time to time to talk about the background against which Nishitani was writing. Of course, that meant summoning up the ghost of Nishida. Then, and for several years after, it was through Nishida's disciples that I was drawn back to his writings.

The summer after Nishitani's book was published under the title *Religion and Nothingness*, we had an unexpected visit from a young scholar who had just finished her doctoral work at Santa Barbara under Raimon Panikkar. Panikkar was a thinker whose pioneering work on interreligious dialogue was well known to us and who was to become a close friend for over twenty years. Yusa Michiko herself would go on to become a central figure in the spread of Nishida's philosophy to western academia, an achievement for which she was deservedly honored by Kanazawa University last year. But fresh out of graduate school and on her way to her first academic position in the United States, she was anxious to establish ties with scholars in her native Japan. Over the years she often joined us at the Nanzan Institute during summer vacation, and in 1994 she spent a sabbatical year with us to complete her renowned intellectual biography of Nishida.

On that first visit, Yusa requested our help in publishing an English translation of Nishida's final essay, "The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious View of the World," which she had prepared as part of her doctoral dissertation. I recall how insistent she was that Nishida's thought had an important contribution to make to the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. The idea was in fact very much in the air at the time. Just a year earlier in 1982, the first meeting of the Japan Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies was held in Kyoto and focused on a series of lectures and discussions with Takizawa Katsumi, a theologian whom Nishida had considered one of his most understanding commentators. Three years later, Nishitani was the featured speaker, and four years after that, Ueda Shizuteru. Over the years, the influence of Nishida and his circle proved crucial to the dialogues of the Society, for which the Nanzan Institute was proud to serve as a headquarters and subsequently took over publication of its journal 『東西宗教研究』.

In any event, it was through Yusa's persuasion that I returned to Nishida and a close reading of that final essay in which he tried to wrap up his conclusions. It was hard going, not only because of its dense prose and broad scope, but also because at every page I became more aware of the immense gaps in my knowledge of the intellectual history east and west that Nishida seemed to navigate with ease. The more I read to fill in those gaps, the more I came to realize that I was in the presence of a truly great mind.

That same year, 1983, I translated a volume of essays by Takeuchi Yoshinori. At the time, Takeuchi, a Pure Land philosopher, was conducting a series of open seminars at our Institute which he had begun in 1976, the year after he had retired from Kyoto University. At Takeuchi's request, I began working on the translation of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, the magnum opus of his teacher, Tanabe Hajime. With its publication in 1986, I felt my feet firmly planted in the Kyoto school, whose works I continued to read with growing interest. I took advantage of my graduate school lectures and seminars to discuss what I was reading with my students. Abe Masao spent a summer with us that same year to review his new translation of Nishida's *Inquiry into the Good*. Through long hours of discussion and tracking down its references, I came to appreciate how *creatively* Nishida used his sources. At the same time, the Institute had just published a translation of his *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, a work which convinced me also of how *critically* Nishida read the philosophers he turned to for inspiration.

I should also mention the Kyoto Zen Symposium which began in 1983 through the cooperation of Hirata Seikō, chief abbot of Tenryū-ji in Kyoto, and a number of philosophers from Kyoto, including Nishitani, Ueda, and Mori Tetsurō. I participated in several of these conferences which, over the course of sixteen years, brought scholars from around the world together to consider timely philosophical topics. Nishida's presence was front and center in the proceedings. The eleventh conference was held on the Kyoto School and the war, at which presentations by Ueda and Yusa went a long ways to clearing away the pot-shots at Nishida's "collaboration" and presenting a more balanced examination of the issues involved. Soon thereafter, John Maraldo and I arranged to translate and publish the papers in 1995 under the title *Rude Awakenings*.

In 1989 I was invited to give a keynote address on "The Religious Philosophy of the Kyoto School" to an international conference at Smith College in the United States. It was my first, and somewhat clumsy, attempt to gather my notes and thoughts about Nishida and his circle. The following year I was invited to teach for a term in the graduate school of the University of Hawai'i. During those few months I completed a translation of Nishitani's book *Nishida Kitarō: The Man and his Thought*. What affected me most was seeing how Nishitani was able to read Nishida's *Inquiry into the Good* through his own lens in search of answers to his own questions. It gave me the push I needed to stand shoulder to shoulder with Nishida's texts in order to clarify my own questions. I remembered something the Anglo-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead used to tell his students, "To be refuted in every century after you have written is the acme of triumph." Students of philosophy who enshrine a philosophical text out of respect for a philosopher, or ignore those who approach it through another language and cultural background, will only kill it in the end.

But first, one has to grasp that elusive *kotsu* that Nishida talked about.

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As I look back, it is not hard to see what attracted me to Nishida's thought. Of course, there were the colleagues whose work I admired and whose criticisms guided me through the exhaustive second education I underwent in Japan. But more than anything, it was wrestling with the thought of Nishida himself and trying to uncover the guiding question that motivated his thought. I took as my compass the words of the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, who once described philosophy as "the concentrated effort to become oneself by participating in reality." In particular, I was predisposed to center on two aspects of this effort: self-transformation and communication. In Nishida, I found them both in abundance.

Regarding self-transformation, two years before he died, Nishida wrote: "Philosophy is a way for the self to become self-aware and to live." The goal of becoming self-aware" through a disciplined study of the enlightened mind lay at the heart of Nishida's philosophical vocation. We see a hint of this in a promise he made to himself during his years of training in Zen meditation: to let go of ego and academic ambitions for the sake of a greater Life, and never to think about what he had not first seen for himself. In his enthusiasm he had declared that he would not take up philosophy until he had attained enlightenment; and that, succeed or fail, he would practice for the rest of his life. In fact, Nishida gave up his practice and study of Zen for the world of books and ideas, and never found a formal place for Zen or meditation in his philosophy. In the end, allusions to spiritual cultivation in any form, religious or otherwise, are all but absent from his published writings. Nevertheless, the ideal of awakening to a greater Life was something he carried with him to the end.

Rather than take any of the standard Buddhist expressions for enlightenment over into his philosophical vocabulary, Nishida preferred neutral and non-denominational language. After some years he settled on "self-awareness," a term that had long since broken free of its classical Buddhist roots and come into common parlance to express being "aware" or "conscious" of something other, and in philosophical circles was being used to translate "self-consciousness." The ambiguity suited him perfectly. He could muffle the word "enlightenment" without having to silence the Buddhist echoes entirely. It is only near the end of his life that he brought the connection between his philosophical notion of self-awareness and the Buddhist notion of enlightenment out of the shadows.

This should not give the idea that Nishida was only interested in personal psychological growth or some other form of self-improvement. He understood the transformation undergone to become oneself—or, as the old Greek proverb has it, "become what you are"—as recognizing that the truest and most original form of what one is can be described as "no-self." We often think of the term as a negation of one's original state, but for Nishida the ordinary, everyday idea we carry around with ourselves about who we are is rather the negation of what we truly are. Here again, Nishida replaced the Buddhist term "no-self" with "True Self." He spoke of it as "a seeing without one who sees," "a working without a worker," and said his goal was "to give a philosophical grounding" to the "voice of the voiceless and form of the formless." It was only in later life that he characterized this as a distinctively Oriental contribution to philosophy, but I have every reason to believe he was aware of this from the start. If one reads through his diaries and then has another look at *Inquiry into the Good,* one can see that he was absorbed in a question that had not occurred in western philosophy, namely, "What is enlightenment?" He scoured western philosophy for the tools to sharpen that question and look at it with fresh eyes. Like an alchemist on a quest for the philosopher's stone, that elusive element that it was believed could turn base metals into gold, the answer that Nishida sought was nothing less than a way to express, in the universal language of philosophy, what it means to "participate in reality." His answer: the self-awareness of absolute nothingness.

It is worth pausing a moment to pull that unfamiliar phrase apart. First, to understand what he meant by *self-awareness,* we need to look at the *double entendre* of the meaning of the "self-" of "self-awareness." On one hand, it means the self's awakened knowledge of itself. The logical problems this gives rise to are obvious. How can I know myself as an object? Like Baron von Münschausen trying to pull himself out of the swamp by his own bootstraps, I am bound to subjectivity when it comes to thinking myself. There is no place I can stand to look at myself looking at myself in the mirror of mind. These are the problems that Nishida wrestled with after he realized, partly as a result of criticisms provoked by *Inquiry into the Good*, that his talk of a unity of consciousness not bound to the subject-object dichotomy raised many more questions than he had anticipated. But he did not back down, and this brings us to the second meaning of the "self-“ of "self-awareness": an awareness that takes place *of itself*. It is not something that one does *by oneself* but something that happens to one *by itself.* You might say, it is a kind of knowing that one "participates in" rather than intentionally carries out—a knowing without a knower. Far from signaling a mere ambiguity or unclarity of expression, both these meanings need to be present simultaneously in Nishida's idea of "self-awareness" in order to replace the idea of a knowing subject standing before itself as an object to be known. It is not that there is no subject but only that the subject is an aspect of a greater reality it participates in rather than observes from without.

This is not as esoteric as it might at first sound. Nishida recalls the buzzing of a fly near his head while on a walk. Before he swats the fly away, identifying himself as a subject dealing with an object, there is a moment of "buzzing" in which he and the fly were both caught up. Nishida's idea was that if one could return to this state of mind without forfeiting the richness of conscious knowledge, that awareness of being a subject before actually separating oneself from the surrounding world would open the mind to a reality immeasurably richer than the sum of the objects we think about. In effect, we become our truest self in the awareness that we are participating in the reality of events taking place around us. In his words, we participate by "seeing by becoming what we see, doing by becoming what we are doing." In a word, self-awareness was Nishida's name for the highest form of *participation* in reality.

When it came to expressing the ultimate nature of the *reality* in which we participate, Nishida eventually settled on the term "absolute nothingness." Having already decided that reality was not a world of objects that the mind sees and works on, he could not make nothingness *absolute* by having it "cut off" from or transcendent to the world of events in which the mind finds itself. Instead, he saw mind and world as "mediators of the self-expression of the absolute." In other words, our seeing and our doing are not merely *ours,* but are also reality's way of expressing itself. So too, our self-awareness in what we see and do is not merely our own achievement but also the self-awareness of reality itself for which we are the medium. In a word, the "self-awareness of absolute nothingness," in its most elemental sense, is the achievement of absolute nothingness, its way of expressing itself in time and history. So, too, when the human mind is aware of the fact that not only does mind participate in reality but that reality participates in mind, "self-awareness" is both subject and object at the same time.

Here again, true to his philosophical method, Nishida did not draw on Buddhist terminology to speak of "the absolute." He did not speak of Dharma in the sense of "cosmic law and order" or of "Buddha nature." Instead, he picked up elements of the notion of "God" from various western philosophers and reinterpreted them in his own way. With no sense of obligation to theology or Christian orthodoxy, he recreated God in the image and likeness of his own philosophy. In short, the attributes of God were seen as symbols to express the absoluteness of absolute nothingness. For Nishida, the most important of these symbolic functions was that of self-negating love.

As mentioned earlier, Nishida did not conceive of the absolute as a supreme being, as something cut off from the world of beings and minds and events. But neither was it a relative being. On the contrary, it had to be something related essentially, at all times and all places, to everything that exists—an ultimate ground that was itself groundless. It had to be a nothingness which manifests itself in the world as relatedness, the purest form of which is self-negating love. The Christian image of God emptying itself of its divinity in order to become human was the supreme expression of such an ideal love in which the distance between self and other is erased. Nishida never saw the western God as the equivalent of his idea of the absolute; nor did he argue his idea of God as a substitute for what he found in western philosophy and theology. He simply saw the received idea of the self-emptying God as a fitting symbol for the self-transformation at which philosophy aims: the achievement of a self-awareness through the negation of self.

I find that I find that one way of bringing these lofty speculations back down to earth is to think of absolute nothingness—and God as its symbolic ideal—as connectedness.

Consider us gathered together here in this hall at this moment. Imagine yourself sitting still and stretching a thread from your chair to each of the large objects to which you yourself are directly related by one or more of your senses—to the floor, the ceiling, and those seated around you, to the lights, the speakers and the sound coming out of them, the podium, the microphone, the walls and windows—until you feel as if you were strapped to an enormous web. Now imagine that everyone around you is doing the same thing; and then that all the things attached to persons are threading their own ties into the weave. No matter where you pinpoint the event of being here and now, it is the center of a field of vectors, each of which is only one among many centers altogether too numerous to count. And that includes only the small fraction of connections that our senses allow us to perceive. If our unfiltered brains had direct access to our surroundings, all the thread in the world would not suffice to spin that web.

The scene we have just imagined is frozen in time and space to include only a small number of more or less direct connections. But let those restrictions melt away and we are connected, literally and in the very same sense, to everything on earth, to everything in our galaxy, and to everything in the billions of galaxies stretching beyond it. Only a few of these connections are direct at any given moment, but each and every item in the whole of the cosmos remains connected indirectly with each and every other. Everywhere it is possible for light to reach, however long it takes and however many objects it has to bounce off of along the way, the totality of all existing universes are connected end to end, piece to piece, such that everything has a road to everywhere. What we call the totality of space is the sum of connections, the stable and the shifting, the strong and the weak, the direct and the indirect.

We have grown so used to the astronomical enormity of the cosmos that we have grown numb to its awe and find it hard to feel shame for espousing religious beliefs that trivialize it in order to secure a place for human beings as the unsurpassed axis of existence. It is not enough that we transcend ourselves by improving and enhancing our persons. We cannot truly get over ourselves without awakening to the transcendent reality of this world and the moral consequences which that entails for its human community: to exist is to be connected; nothing that exists is disconnected. This fact, which is as close to a universally literal fact as we can come, is the original miracle of existence. It is also what Nishida meant by absolute nothingness.

If there is anything absolute in reality, anything, that is, whose reality is absolved of dependency on anything else, it would have to be something absolutely relative, unlike the relative relativity of beings. It would have to be related to everything directly and at each moment, which is something that nothing in existence can lay claim to—in short, a nothingness. This means that its relationship to beings is not that of one more vector, albeit a more powerful one, added to each field of connections that hold individual entities in existence. At the same time, as a nothingness, it is not perceptible or knowable except through its manifestations in the world of being and becoming. This manifestation cannot be associated with any particular entity or group of entities inasmuch as that would disqualify it from being absolutely relative to all beings. The one thing that is manifest in the entire cosmos of interrelated beings without itself existing is, as you must have realized by now, connectedness, the sole universal and literal commonality of existence. If the concrete relatedness between human beings is an instance of the relatedness of all things that reaches indefinitely in all directions, that relatedness, in turn, is a concrete manifestation of an all-embracing connectedness that is in this world yet not of it. It is not quite right to speak of it as finite and this-worldly, nor as infinite and other-worldly. If anything, it fairly subverts these distinctions.

If, as Nishida thought, there is something we can only call "divine" about the nothingness of connectedness, then there is also something divine about its manifestation in that human passion for the reformation of relatedness towards justice, mercy, and love that continually draws us beyond our own small selves. In love that is selfless and self-aware we participate in reality to the fullest and reality participates in us to the fullest.

Let us now turn to the second mark of philosophy's "concentrated effort to become oneself by participating in reality": communication. One often hears the complaint that Nishida's writing communicated poorly. Anyone who has read him understands this. I admit to having been disappointed at how little impact the literary style of the philosophers he read in French, English, and German had on his own prose. But once he had put his thoughts on paper in Japanese, however formidable his style and terminology, there is no doubt that new doors were opened. Readers are relieved when Nishida's prose comes to a clearing where he can take his bearings and begin to lay out an argument smoothly and quickly, after having watched him hack his way step by step through the dense underbrush of possibilities with the logic, "If so, then it must be that…" It seems to me that writing was not a way to systematically present his conclusions, but a way for him to evaluate what he was thinking. His chosen mode of communication was to lay bare the journey to the conclusions. Nishida wrote as if he were on a voyage of discovery. He did not set sail on a clear course for a determined destination. It is as if he had drawn up the rudder and unfurled his sails to be driven by the winds and currents towards whatever there was to be found. His books and essays are a running log of that journey.

When I introduce graduate students to Nishida's writing, I often recall something I heard Takeuchi say many years ago in an interview on Sunday morning NHK's "Religion Hour." Religion, he said, is not primarily a noun but a verb. It is not a thing that exists somewhere in texts and buildings, but something that "takes place." The same can be said of the way Nishida pursued philosophy day and night, from his first book to his last essay. What he was communicating was not a record of past ideas but a way of life taking place at the moment he was writing. Rather than just research philosophy, he philosophized.

In approaching his question of the enlightened mind through the traditional logic of western philosophy, Nishida also made a contribution to that logic with his idea of *soku* and his logic of *basho.* That said, shortly before his death, he could not suppress the feeling that his logic had been "misunderstood and neglected by the academic community," that nobody had captured his *kotsu.* We now think differently about that, and part of the reason lies in the impact that translations of works by Nishida and his circle into western languages, and the groundswell of enthusiasm for Japanese philosophy in general, had on the academic world in Japan.

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This brings me to one more important but often overlooked fact about Nishida's philosophical writing. The claim by many Japanese commentators that his writing must be read in the original to be understood, that it suffers badly from translation, is misguided. Obviously, he wrote in Japanese; and just as obviously, there was almost no reading audience for Japanese philosophy outside of Japan. I have done enough translation work in enough languages to realize how nuances and oblique allusions often get lost in translation. But there are at least three reasons for not disparaging the study of Nishida's thought through translation.

First, and most important, Nishida was *not* writing for a Japanese audience. He was writing for those who had the same questions as he and understood the contribution that philosophy had to make to our understanding of human existence and its place in reality. I have no doubt that Nishida would have welcomed the criticisms and suggestions of the growing number of scholars abroad who read his work with different eyes from his native Japanese readership. At least he would have valued it more highly than unquestioning adulation. As we said, it was the "universality" of the philosophical vocation that enthused him, not the creation of something for domestic appreciation that would block its inner meaning to outsiders.

To put this in a larger context, I recall something Thomas Kasulis, the renowned scholar of Japanese philosophy, used to say: Where would we be if only Danes had the final say about Kierkegaard's writings? What if only a native speaker of English could be trusted to grasp the true meaning of the writings of William James? The answer is clear. There would be no such thing as a western philosophical tradition. There would only be national philosophies isolated behind the impenetrable curtain of native linguistic skills. I have never seen any indication that Nishida thought of himself as a philosopher *for Japan*, nor that he was ever silenced by his failure to appreciate the literary subtleties of what he read in foreign languages.

Second, translation is a door to deeper criticism and greater clarity of thought. Not only does the translator expand the reading audience of what they are translating, they identify blind spots in the original text that the eye of a native reader may skip over. Anyone who has translated their own work knows the feeling of wanting to clear up unclarities in their original text. If I may say so, I believe that if Nishida had seen his own work in translation, he would feel differently about his own responsibility for having been "misunderstood," and might even look more kindly at the insight of Tanabe Hajime and other critics he locked horns with and acknowledge more explicitly how they changed his own thinking.

And third, translation reminds us that where Nishida philosophy ends, ours begins. To really understand Nishida, it is not enough to catalog Nishida's ideas or track the development of his thought. Historians of ideas who never get beyond hunting down mistakes in translation and misreadings of texts end up burying Nishida's philosophy alive. The virtue of correct and accurate representation becomes a vice when it gives Nishida the last word on what Nishida philosophy is. As Goethe once wrote, we honor those who influence our thinking not by repeating their responses but by emulating their courage. If Nishida indeed approached philosophy as a voyage of discovery, we dishonor his idea of what philosophy is by carving his ideas in stone and planting them in his native soil. In the end, the *kotsu* is to be sought not only in the guiding ideas but in the spirit of adventure as well.

If there is one thing students of Japanese philosophy in the twentieth century have in common, it is the judgment that Nishida changed the way we define philosophy both inside Japan and in the West. At the time I arrived in Japan, the dominant assumption in the West was that Japan has no philosophy and that in any case, the name "philosophy" is to be reserved for the tradition originating in sixth-century BCE Greece. Even in Japan's bookstores Nishida´s books were classified under "thought," and the shelves marked "philosophy" were exclusively for western philosophy. Things are different now, and the re-importation of the interest abroad in Nishida and other Kyoto School thinkers back to the homeland had a considerable part to play in Japanese philosophy's change of fortunes. To make a complex story shamefully simple, once it became clear that the academies of Europe and the United States were beginning to take these thinkers more seriously as philosophers than their counterpart in the Japanese homeland, it was not long before more academics in Japan followed suit and actively sought to restore the imbalance.

By "taking seriously" I mean publishing introductory texts, organizing research associations, and directing graduate students in their theses, and producing quality scholarly work. A word about the last two.

There is no doubt that the existence of even the modest presence of translated material helped Japanese philosophy gain a foothold in western graduate schools. On one hand, young Japanese studying abroad were able to convince their teachers to let them work on large bodies of texts by virtually unknown authors. On the other, growing numbers of young western students with an appetite for non-western thought were motivated to learn Japanese and carry out research on Japanese philosophers. Many from these two groups went on to become professors and expose their own students to the world of Japanese philosophy. Although it is still common to find Japanese and Chinese philosophy restricted to departments of "Asian Studies," the inroads into departments of philosophy had been advancing steadily.

It is, of course, in the quality of scholarly work that the acceptance of Japanese philosophy in western academia is most clearly demonstrated, and the evidence here is unmistakable. Having been involved for the past any years in the publication of the *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy,* I am continually surprised by the high level of material being produced. Even so, I would only like to express some misgivings about how too much attention to "comparative philosophy” has obscured an important question for the true “universality” that Nishida sought through his writings.

At first sight, the most obvious path to bringing Nishida’s thought to the attention of a wider philosophical forum is to compare his thought with leading philosophers past and present. It comes down to this: by demonstrating that there are elements in his thought that coincide with, complement, or contradict the thought of respected thinkers in the West, his place in the dialogue among philosophies becomes more secure. To put it simply, there are two main strategies by which this is carried out in academic philosophy today.

One way is to select certain key ideas and take them at face value without attention to temporal and cultural differences. This relies on the belief, often tacit, in a core of “perennial philosophy” reaching from the ancient Greeks to present-day western philosophy. Even where attention if given to historical circumstances that shape particular ideas, as long as the fundamental questions are taken to be transhistorical, the answers can bring us closer to a universal truth on which all philosophies can agree. The benefit of this approach is that it frees Nishida´s thinking from its Japanese origins and allows it to be more cosmopolitan. The danger is that “universal” come to mean “uniform,” which strays from Nishida’s intentions which was to seek the universal by identifying the modes of relationality that can bring the particulars of one cultural or history system of thought into dialogue with other particularities. Comparing ideas across traditions without attention to specificities of history or culture does break through the limits of a single philosophical tradition, but it risks subsuming all traditions under a blanket of archetypal ideas that are in fact excavated from one of those particular traditions but masquerading as universal. Even where attention if given to historical circumstances that shape particular ideas, as long as the fundamental questions are taken to be transhistorical, the answers are granted the right to ignore those circumstances. This is not the place to go into detail, but I believe that Nishida’s logic of *basho* needs to be broadened to include philosophical traditions themselves so as to protect the distinctness of Japanese philosophy rather than minimize them in order to find acceptance on a general philosophical forum.

A second strategy is to compare ideas across cultures but within a common temporal frame of reference. The idea is to identify global changes that bring philosophies into conversation with one another, such as industrialization, modernity, or scientific-technological world views. These approaches may all have been western inventions, but from the time Japanese words for philosophy and religion were first created in the mid-nineteenth century their academic study has always been comparative in this sense. It is only natural to suppose that the best way to bring Nishida into dialogue with other philosophies is to assume that the present world has thrown our traditions together to enrich one another by searching for a shared vocabulary to discuss ideas of very different origins. Much scholarship today follows this strategy by singling out live and momentous questions that cut across cultural, philosophical, and religious barriers. In so doing, the merits and demerits of comparing particulars are of less interest than the role that ideas play in prompting an awakening on all sides as a requisite for morally acceptable action. The underlying idea is that only when comparison is in service of something outside the framework of the comparison is it worth doing at all.

Each of these comparative approaches can be treated in two very different ways. If you will pardon me a rather mundane example, it is like the difference between Japanese and western wedding receptions. In the former, the scholar is like the go-between introducing two traditions of ideas to one another without obliging them to interact immediately. It is enough that the similarities and differences are laid out accurately but kept at separate tables. In the latter, after the proper introductions have been made, the two traditions are invited to join on the dance floor. In either case, the goal is the same: to stimulate philosophy to move beyond theoretical speculation to reflection on the practical consequences of ideas.

For a long time, I lived and worked as if the task of engaging philosophies and religions in intellectual dialogue ended there. In time, I began to realize that there is more involved than a search for the universal in the particular and a personal awakening to the moral consequences of our ideas. In arriving at that realization, Nishida's example of the philosophical life was an inspiration, both for what it achieved and for what it has yet to achieve.

As we have been saying, the *kotsu* of Nishida's philosophy consisted in thinking questions thrown up to him by his own life and the intellectual history of Japan under the lens of western philosophy in order to uncover what is universal in them and return it, in a new expression, to the world of philosophy. To understand Nishida's contribution, it is not enough to retrace his steps historically and paraphrase his ideas accurately. One has also to walk in his shoes, "to reread Nishida by becoming Nishida." For Nishida's thought to be alive in contemporary philosophy, we need to turn the tables on his method, that is, to ask questions of it that he did *not* ask himself and put the universality of his logic to the test in the effort to answer them. To fear his brilliance, even out of respect, is ultimately to disrespect the *kotsu* of his own "comparative philosophy." To exempt him from the very critical conscience with which he shaped and reshaped his thinking is to deny his legacy the life that I am convinced it deserves.

Of all the questions Nishida failed to ask himself, there is one that stands out above the rest for us today: What has philosophy to contribute to the protection of this endangered hometown we call the earth? Never before in the history of civilization has the human race so badly needed a common story grounded in the earth and its history. It is against this backdrop that our philosophers face their most pressing challenge. Although academic philosophy is a long way from admitting it, I am convinced that its future hangs on its contribution to a story of the common good encompassing enough and mythical enough to capture our imagination and release us from the comfort of our petty biases—academic, cultural, political, economic, and personal. For this we need a sturdier philosophy than Nishida was able to forge.

Absent the will to believe in such a story, the gap between the thoughts we can think and the actions we are prepared to take will always be greater than any society of human beings can breach. Globalization on such a high constructive level cannot be a new story composed from scratch. It needs to integrate long-formed traditions, in a critical reprise, giving them a new dynamic inflection. In this sense, it is not so much a question of "comparing" but of reactivating traditions in mutual solicitation and in openness to the signs of the times. Care for the earth and for the common good in the deepest sense imposes a hermeneutical imperative that bids us make sense of our traditions and scholarly specializations in a new way. Academia has been largely immune to such attempts, or at least has tended to marginalize them, while our native philosophical and religious instincts leave us gasping for air.

Nishida's life work taught us that the walls that separate the philosophies of the world are not as high as the heavens. To honor his memory, we now need to find a way to reconstruct his thought in order to tie it more tightly to the earth.