

My Friend Nishida Kitarō

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WHETHER AS A THINKER or a person, my friend Nishida was one of the most remarkable figures that contemporary Japan has ever produced. As I am not the right person to comment on him as a thinker, I would instead like to relate my thoughts on him as a person.

To characterize him, he was, in a word, a thoroughly sincere person. He was above putting on airs or making a show of himself—this to an uncanny degree. It is basic human nature to want to somehow spiffy up our original self when others are around, but Nishida was always the same, no more no less, whatever company he found himself. Attired in the garb of an old country gentleman, he was inwardly and outwardly always himself, no frills attached.

Never one to curry favor or fawn upon others, Nishida would greet everyone in an ordinary way, regardless of whether he was in the company of eminent statesman or rich industrialist. It never occurred to him to make allowance for social status or that he should act deferentially in such circumstances; it was simply not part of his makeup.

Of extremely reserved character, Nishida would remain silent, literally tight-lipped, when he had nothing to say. And so those who met him for the first time were often intimidated by his demeanor and ended up beating a hasty retreat, though there was, I believe, no call to do so.

When the topic of discussion did not particularly interest him, he did not try to make things easier for the person he was talking to; that is to

* This is a translation of "Waga tomo Nishida Kitarō" (June 1946), in *Suzuki Daisetsu Zenshū* [SDZ; Collected Works] 19:292-296. It was written by Suzuki in June 1946, one year after Nishida's death, and appended to a revised edition of *Culture and Religion* (1942; rev. ed. 1946), to which Nishida had earlier contributed a preface. We wish to thank the Matsugaoka Library, Kamakura, for permission to publish it here. Annotation is that of the translator. The translator thanks Horio Tsutomu and Michiko Yusa for the detailed information on Nishida presented here.

say, he was by nature not given to idle chatter. But once the conversation picked up, he would discuss matters in such earnest that one could barely get a word in edgewise. Philosophy, mathematics, science were of course prime subjects for him, but he was also keenly interested in political issues as well. As I am in the dark when it comes to mathematics, I would often go to ask him about it. Whenever I did, he would take out a scrap of paper and a pencil, and drawing lines here and jotting numbers there, he would explain these matters for as long as I'd care to listen. And then he'd tell me the biography of some famous mathematician or other, for he loved to read the biographies of learned men.

Politics was a favorite topic from the time we were students [in middle school]. As I knew practically nothing of these affairs, I'd venture one impractical line of reasoning after another. Was it around the time of the Manchurian Incident [18-19 September 1931] or the Marco Polo Bridge Incident [7 July 1937]? I cannot recall, but when the news broke I called on him immediately to blurt out my opinions on the matter. Writers like myself tend to forget and so now I have no recollection at all what that particular incident was, but Nishida was extremely articulate that day. As our views were in rapport from long before, I only remember nodding in agreement.

As to the recent war, Nishida and I shared much the same outlook from the beginning, and so we were in good agreement whenever it came up in discussion. It grieves me terribly to think he did not live to see [the war end with Japan's] unconditional surrender. There were so many things we would have wanted to discuss, but there's no asking fate to make an exception.

We also held much the same opinion with regard to education, especially concerning scientific education. Today things have changed greatly, but until recently students were required to take courses in ethics so as to provide them with a moral education. Educators now think that there is nothing in science that [moral] cultivation or [ethical] training can contribute to, that there is no way [scientific] knowledge and [moral] virtue can mutually enhance one another. But the assumption that science is without moral qualities is incorrect. In science one has to observe nature directly, with a detached mind; the slightest intrusion of the mind and Nature refuses to yield up her secrets. Again, when doing experiments, if a scientist lacks sincerity to even the slightest degree, his

research can never be said to be consummate. Indeed, there is nothing more demanding than science when it comes to the moral qualities of honesty, sincerity, diligence, prudence, detachment and frankness. And so, depending on how science is taught, it can exert a tremendous impact contributing to the refinement of the human character. Those who imagine science to be simply the accumulation of facts to memorize preordain the abuse of science. Such people have not penetrated the true spirit of science. Not only are they unable to pursue scientific research diligently, they also close themselves off to the idea of improving their own human character through scientific pursuit. It is imperative that those who are put in charge of scientific education from now have a clear awareness of the basic spirit of science as such.

Nishida was a person in whom the spirit of scientific pursuit burned fervently. Sincere person that he was, whenever he encountered a point that was unclear to him, he would press forward diligently, research it thoroughly, before he would be satisfied. It was at this point where personal sincerity and intellectual acumen merged that he established his philosophy. Often when we say a person is sincere, it can mean he is honest to a fault, unable to compromise, intellectually rather naive. But Nishida's sincerity was a positive, tenacious spirit that would not bow in defeat until it reached the final stronghold. Despite several unfortunate incidents in his family life, he struggled against all odds to establish his philosophical system. The undaunted spirit with which he strove to achieve his goal should be evident to anyone who has examined his writings from that period. Among the logical constructions of a seemingly dispassionate mind, so many are the mottlings of tears copiously shed! This aspect of Nishida was known only to those who knew him as a friend.

At one time a person possessed of a dispassionate mind, who earnestly marshalled his willpower, might have made headway. But Nishida was possessed of an exceptional temperament in the form of a warm, compassionate heart. Armed with such temperament he was able to unravel the threads of his philosophical thought to make one breakthrough after another. And so if we were to ask what made him so exceptional we cannot fail to point out the temperament he possessed. It would seem that as long that warm, compassionate heart was beating, it provided him with an inexhaustible source of energy for his thoughts and feelings, or so it seemed to me. And so his logic has coursing

through its veins the life blood [of his passionate temperament]. As we read his final treatise,¹ it conveys to us the circumstances under which he composed his work.

Nishida was not fond of lectures, nor did he willingly agree to write papers. The reason was he was afraid he'd lose the thread of his own thought were he to do so. Anything he regarded as a diversion from the path he set out to explore, he simply eliminated. Sometimes people who come to make a request can be rather insistent. In those cases he would boldly refuse, anything so as to get out of it. "Today I got into a big argument with so-and-so," he'd come to tell me. As for me, I'm timid, and when someone asks me to give a lecture, after putting up a weak show of protest I find myself consenting in the end. Later I may regret my decision, but in the teeth of the situation I simply cannot muster up the courage to refuse. Nishida would often chide me on this, saying, "Always squandering your time on that—when will you get around to your real work?" But there have been occasions when, in the middle of a lecture, a thought would come to me, providing the clue to solving a problem I'd been struggling with for a long time.

Some years ago, the Ministry of Education put together a book called *Kokushi gaisetsu* [An Outline of Japanese History, 1943]. This work had its own special [political] agenda, and so it did not present a very factual account of historical events. For instance, there was no mention of the Jinshin civil war.² And so when a high-ranking Ministry of Education official brought it to Nishida one day to get his approval, Nishida became extremely upset. Eradicating historical fact, falsifying history—whether by commission or, as in this case, by omission—was, to him, unacceptable for the education of the Japanese people. That a Ministry of Education official should try to pull off a stunt like this, should shirk his responsibility in the education of the people, was to his

¹ Nishida's final treatise, *Basho-teki ronri to shūkyō-teki sekaikan* [The Logic of *Topos* and the Religious Worldview] (1945), NKZ 11:371–412. This treatise is closely related to Suzuki's 1944 work, *Japanese Spirituality* (*Nihonteki reisei*; SDZ 8:1–224), whose fifth chapter, entitled "The Zen of the Diamond Sutra" ("Kongōkyō no Zen"; SDZ 5:369–460), is, importantly, the source of the so-called logic of *sokuhi* that Nishida critiques from the standpoint of his own religious philosophy.

² *Jinshin no ran*. A protracted civil war that broke out in 672 due to troubled succession to the imperial throne.

mind an outrage. And so with voice trembling, face livid, he showered a rain of abuse on the poor official. It was the next day or soon after that I happened to call on Nishida.³ After he told me about the official's visit, he remarked, "Maybe I shouldn't have been so hard on him." His wife, who could not help overhearing our conversation, was pacing back and forth nervously. From that I gathered Nishida must have utterly denounced the official. At any rate, he was one who found it contemptible to deny, misrepresent or obfuscate [historical] fact. As the Ministry of Education was founded with the original intent to establish guidelines for upholding the moral standards of the country, it is hard to imagine how such a thing could have happened. That an official in the employ of the Ministry should set out to produce [a stilted version of] national history and force it on the people is, from today's perspective, highly undemocratic.

After this incident, the same Ministry of Education official abused his position by having the doctorates, that had already been granted by the university, revoked. He also set up a committee to investigate Nishida's [political] thought, and did everything he could to directly or indirectly make trouble for Nishida. The doctoral recipients were all students under Nishida's tutelage, and, citing political reasons, the official had the processing of their applications from the university blocked [at the Ministry level]. Later on, this complication was straightened out and brought to an amicable conclusion.⁴

Nishida was invariably correct in his evaluation of people. Today, among those singled out as war criminals are those whom Nishida had dealings with, but he would often say of them, "That fellow hasn't got the mettle [to be leader]." First and last he felt that giving such men important government positions was inadvisable, that they would never make the grade. As men of discernment seem ever so few these days, it

³ According to Nishida's diaries, Suzuki visited him on Monday, 5 April 1943, one week after the ministry official's visit. The ministry official seems to have been a person named Kondō, head of the division of learning/scholarship.

⁴ The doctoral students under Nishida were Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) and Yanagida Kenjūrō (1893–1983), both of whom later became professors of philosophy at Kyoto University. Note that Suzuki's remarks were written before Nishitani's dismissal from the university in 1949 on the grounds of allegedly supporting the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere; Nishitani was reinstated several years later.

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may well be that destiny has turned her back on Japan.

Nishida was truly a man of exceptional temperament, of deep and penetrating knowledge, of firm will. When he left the university upon retirement, he said, "Up to now what I've done has been for other people; from now I plan to immerse myself in my own research," and thus he devoted himself solely to his thoughts and writings. It is unfortunate that he died so suddenly, for he had a brilliant mind that still had much work to complete. How desolate all this makes me feel!

TRANSLATED BY W. S. YOKOYAMA