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Discontinuity in Time

Robert E. Carter

Professor Nishitani Keiji was then in his mid-eighties, and on the hot summer day that we met to discuss Japanese philosophy, he was quite evidently experiencing deep sorrow. His wife had died only three days earlier, and I had anticipated that he would send word that he could not meet with me as we had arranged. Instead, he sent word that he was expecting me that afternoon, as arranged. This was my third visit to his home, and it had been two years since my last visit to Kyoto. The earlier conversations had gone on for many hours at a time, but I was asked, by a mutual friend, to be brief because of his personal loss. What follows is a summary of our dialogue that day, with only Nishitani Sensei's contributions recorded, for the most part.

He met me at the door, greeting me warmly, and seated me in the living room of his tiny home. Several family members were in the house, evidently providing comfort and assistance, and no sooner had I expressed my sorrow to him, then tea was set before us both. He poured, looked up, and with strength and control, as well as with blunt honesty and deep feeling, said that coming to grips with death is a difficult problem. He repeated this again after a meditative pause: "I have thought about death for many years, but it remains a difficult problem—it is very difficult." The theme of death would re-appear often in the hours that followed.

We talked of each other's research and writing, and soon the conversation turned to the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, and he seemed to be relieved to have his mind at least partly on other things. "The logic of *basho* is not ordinary logic," he said. "It is logic which allows one to say 'one *soku* many,' and 'many *soku* one.'" "*Soku-hi*" means "is and is not," and symbolically represents the vanishing point where one thing turns into its apparent opposite, where forward motion (at its zenith) becomes receding motion which, in turn (at its nadir) becomes forward motion again. It is the almost imperceptible flow through the point where upper sand in an hourglass becomes the lower, and then, upon turning the glass over, the lower becomes the upper, only to flow through the vanishing point of opposition once more, becoming the lower yet again. "*Basho*" ("place," matrix, or the final "nothingness" or "emptiness" in which things as self-contradictory arise) is best expressed by means of that which is absolutely contradictory, and yet is at the same time a

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complete identity. 'One is not many', and yet 'one is many' appear to be contradictory. Within the logic of *basho*, however, they are also aspects united within the whole."

"'Basho' means not just 'place,' but the place where something is, in its suchness. It is the place where something is seen, or known, indeed where everything is seen or known. It is like Heidegger's 'clearing,' except that it is the largest universal, and not a limited place surrounded by the dark forest. Thus, rather than a clearing, it is 'clearness,' suchness, where whatever is seen is seen as it is—or, if that claim is too great—where everything seen is seen more clearly than it has ever been seen before."

"*Soku-hi* is absolute contradiction—I/you, I/thou, self/other, man/God—but as *basho* is the place where man exists, and where God exists, the man-*soku*-God, and God-*soku*-man seeming contradictories are but *aspects* of a relationship which itself arises out of *basho*. The contradictoriness, and absolute otherness, gives way to a *unity*, like life/death as aspects of a human journey. And relationships of this kind may be found *only* where I-am-now! Where-I-am-now-ness is our only contact with *basho*, wherein the unity of opposition may be discerned. It is in *basho* that unity rests, and it is a grander or wider perspective than either of the parts that leads us beyond thing/part/term logic, to a logic of *synthesis*. Things are now seen in relation, as well as separately; as complementary, as well as in opposition; as antagonists which, when taken together, are expressions of the very same unity—the is-and-is-not of *soku-hi*. *Basho* is *where* this happens, and where it is seen. The logic of *basho* is the logic of unity as the juxtaposition of absolute contradictories. To know the place, is to know it through the very fabric of that absolute contradiction which exists within it—as a unity where opposites dwell in their distinctness."

Action, whether human or otherwise, is the *character* of place. *Basho*, or place is always historical. It is where history comes to be *as* history. Our bodies are also historical. Action, body, and place are always just as they are because of everything else. All is interconnected such that whatever is, and whatever arises, does so because it is an historical expression of that totality. At the same time, it is wonderfully unique, and therefore free, for there has never been, nor will there likely ever be another moment, body, or happening exactly like this one. The arising is unique."

Nishitani Sensei picked up his tea cup, and continued, "This cup is always this cup, and for it to reappear, the whole history of the cosmos must repeat itself such that this place, this moment, and this history arises once more afresh. *Individuality* implies a kind of absoluteness of existence. It is always one-of-a-kind, and it is one-of-a-kind in each and every moment. In this sense, everything must be seen as an individual, and as unique. Even the smallest

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fleck of dust is unique and absolute, for in the whole history of the cosmos there will never be the same dust again. Otherwise, the cosmos will have to repeat itself in its complexity and completeness! Of course, an individual, like the cup, or perhaps a tree is, and is not a cup or a tree, respectively. It is not a cup because, as every Buddhist knows, the doctrine of impermanence teaches that the cup is ever changing, is without substance and permanence, and is but a temporary expression of the *whole*, which is itself unseen, yet seen in this cup, in this moment, in this place. But it is also a cup, *this* cup, *right now*, here, and precisely in *this* place. So it is that all history is of the present, and is in the present. History is a continuity as seen from the discontinuity of the NOW, the moment. The present is a mode of time that cuts or breaks time as a continuity, as a continuum. Hence, the present is the origination point of all time, of all history, of the past and the future. Continuity is negated in order for specific times, specific histories, specific events to arise. They stand out of the flow as *discontinuities*."

He sipped from his cup, breathed deeply as though reflecting both about what he would say next, and about his ache of grief which "lined" his thinking and acting in every moment, then continued. "Similarly, for the awareness of 'I am I' to arise the self must negate (or mitigate) itself in order to become self-conscious." The issue of the "I" as subject becoming aware of the "I" as object had arisen because I had inquired whether Nishida's "pure experience" was non-intentional, or merely intentionally implicit rather than explicit, and thus, retrospectively recoverable. I was asking whether that range of experiences, from "pure experience" to *satori* was consciousness *of* and object by a *subject*. Since we all live in a post-Husserlian world, it would be a major claim indeed to hold that awareness could be an awareness which was not "of" something: which did not conform to the *noema-noesis* intentional structure of consciousness. Nishitani Sensei opted for the *former*, more controversial position, speaking of *basho* as "some deeper ground from which self-consciousness and all other intentional experience springs. One can step out of the place of intentionality, into the place where the place mirrors itself. Of course, to speak of a mirror is already misleading. There is no mirror, nor is there anything to be reflected."

At this, we began to laugh like kids, as we savoured this delicate and hard-to-hold Zen koan together. Perhaps it was his first full moment away from grief for some time. Continuing the analogy, he instructed that the situation we wished to understand is akin to "a mirror reflecting itself in itself. Or, to alter the image, imagine that one has two mirrors, A and B, facing each other. These mirrors have no frames—just pure mirrors. One can see mirror B in mirror A, and mirror A in mirror B. But one may also see mirror A in mirror B in mirror A, and mirror B in mirror A in mirror B, and so on. To escape is to

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destroy both mirrors. Then the ceaseless reflection-on-reflection will finally cease. Is this the Buddhist *nirvana*? Well, it is not Zen, for the Zen man knows that there is no need to destroy the mirrors! Here again we come to the logic of *basho*, for we must both destroy and not-destroy the mirrors. Now all of this is rather like a traditional koan: the farmer must catch his spade by the handle, firmly, and yet continue to have an empty hand. On the one side, there is no farmer and no spade, and yet there is a farmer who, when he comes to grasp the true nature of work, will do so with empty hands. This is *soku-hi*. This is also the egoless spontaneity of Zen. But the contradiction of *soku-hi* is not relative contradiction (A is A), but absolute contradiction, or absolute self-contradiction. And from this self-contradiction arises self-identity and self-determination."

As Nishitani Sensei's home was now filling with the aromas and noises of his family preparing his evening meal, it was evident that our intense conversation had to be brought to a close. I asked one last, but large question, viz. whether Nishida had ever made the turn in his mature writings from Ontology to Axiology. The answer given was no surprise. "There is no such distinction, either in Nishida or in Japan. Consider a Japanese rock garden, like Ryōan-ji, for example. Most people look at the surface of the garden, the beautiful rocks, the rippled patterns in the sand, the moss and earth-coloured walls but the garden is the expression of the landscape architect's own enlightenment! Indeed, now that there is this enlightenment expression in the world, it is as though the garden is, in fact, looking at us. Underneath our feet, were we there, and at this place, the garden is looking at us, for we are now *objects* of the garden, within the garden, and as such have ourselves become part of the expression of the garden's creator. The garden is my Zen master now, and your Zen master. So it is, axiologically speaking, that values arise as the transformation of human awareness, or sensitivity to values. One's ontology may yield transformed and enhanced value possibilities. The 'transvaluation' of values occurs only when one's understanding of reality has been radically altered."

Nishitani Sensei pointed to a painting of plum blossoms, on the wall next to me, and read the verse which was there inscribed: "By the roadside, along the Yangtze river, wild plum trees grow, filling the air with richly fragrant blossoms. We admire the fragrance, for we are in the midst of it." He stared at the painting, then continued, "For the poet or the painter, to be as aware as it seems that he was, he had to be totally there, totally involved in the *now* of this experience, and, as a result of an ontological shift, he was able to have a 'pure experience' of this moment. He is in the midst of the fragrant blossoms, or better, there is only awareness richly fragrant blossoms. The subject-object distinction of intentionality is not present, for it is awareness apart

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from or prior to such distinction. All values arise in such immediate experience, and, if they are of the sort to which Nishida and the garden architect, and the poet gave expression, they arise out of the pre-intentionality of 'pure experience'."

It was with these words, from the painting of plum blossoms by the Yangtze, that he inscribed my copy of *Religion and Nothingness*, so that our philosophical encounter, our "discontinuity" in time would be well marked. It was now three hours later, and Nishitani Sensei walked with me from his house, seemingly as reluctant to end our time together as I was, and he walked with me up a steep and long stairway near his house, to an old Shinto shrine, where we chatted for a few minutes more. We walked back down to the street, where the taxi that he had called was waiting for me. Standing in his grey-black *yukata*, cane in hand, he waved good-bye in the Kyoto dusk. I shall not soon forget this man, whose life illustrates better than most just how uniquely worthwhile a human life can become.

The Man of the Circle: A Table Talk—1984

Hakan Eilert

At the Center for the Study of Japanese Religions (NCC) we learned that Professor Nishitani, then retired, would be willing to attend the informal discussions we held, so we used to invite him to the Center, where we students of religion met regularly to discuss his newly translated book, *Religion and Nothingness*.

He would appear about half an hour late, dressed in traditional Japanese dress, looking very down to earth. He seemed somewhat disoriented as he entered the room, and asked shyly if this was where he was supposed to be. He carried a plastic bag with his cigarettes—his favorite brand was Lark—and a lighter. He placed the dark red package in front of him on the table, asked with a smile if he was allowed to smoke, and started to dig for the lighter. The utter unpretentiousness of his personality filled the room.

He listened with unattentive attentiveness to our brief words of welcome as we told him that we had read his book, *Religion and Nothingness*, that we were thrilled by his insights, and that we felt deeply honored by his agreeing to spend some time with us.