

A Small Fish Swallows a Large Fish

Ōhashi Ryōsuke

“I often thought looking at Sensei’s face that nature must have had more strength than usual on the day when she breathed life into Sensei’s body. She must have stopped just before the bodily equilibrium would have been destroyed. As a result, the top of his head protruded more, his ears, nose and mouth had become strong and large, and his eyes, delicate organs like Beethoven’s ears, seemed to be unable to bear the strength of the life inside them and thus verged on a functional breakdown.”

Thus Nishitani Keiji describes his teacher Nishida Kitarō in *Waga shi Nishida Kitarō o kataru* (“Talking about my teacher Nishida Kitarō”). If I were to write in imitation of that, I would say that Nishitani’s facial features were classical, but that his ears were conspicuously large. And they stood up. Late at night, in the dim light of the lamp that hung in Sensei’s study, many times I have seen the silhouettes of those ears standing up from the sides of his head. On the day when nature breathed life into Sensei’s body, her breath must have whirled up around him in circles, particularly around the ears. As for his eyes, they were smaller than normal, but they, too, were no ordinary eyes. By this I mean that it was almost impossible to perceive any movement of the eyeballs. They were eyes that never seemed agitated, not even when exposed to the wind and rain of the outside world. It was as though the breath of nature that had circled around above his ears had imparted a force deep into his eyes such that they always seemed to emit a quiet glow that came from somewhere in the depths of his ears.

I like to think that those ears and eyes were bodily manifestations which appeared as adjuncts of Sensei’s thought. Rationalistic thought, from ancient Greece to modern Europe, regards “looking” rather than “listening” as essential. To look is to separate seer and seen, to objectify. Objective judgments arise from this, and “I think,” the fundamental condition of subjectivity, invariably accompanies that judgment. On the other hand, the paradigmatic thinking of “to listen,” which originated in Christianity, came to be regarded as a different trend in philosophy. God’s Logos was something to listen to. This could be understood as the Buddhist idea of *chōmon*, listening to sermons or talks on the Dharma. The Dharma or Logos to which we must listen

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is the principle of existence. When a person listens intently to this Dharma, the ten thousand things lose their distance and become one with him.

Didn't Sensei's large ears indicate that his thinking was, first and foremost, this kind of "listening"? And yet, Sensei's eyes were eyes that penetrated the principle of the ten thousand things that had, through his listening, become one with his self. They saw all the way to the individual pleats on the inner lining of that principle. Looking at sounds that become audible is not impossible. The Bodhisattva Kannon looks at sounds.

Nishitani's description of Nishida continues:

"As for Sensei's body, which was smaller than average, the upper half was bent forward considerably. He looked like a hunchback. But this did not give even the slightest impression of his being unstable or frail. On the contrary, it seemed that it was this that gave his body its balance. It was just as though his entire body was consolidated at its center of gravity by having the upper half of the body bent forward."

Nishitani Sensei himself was also much shorter than average, but in spite of that he did not give one the impression of being small. Nor did he strike one as possessing any conspicuous amount of energy. Rather, his size seemed to extend limitlessly like the sky or atmosphere. When Sensei would go for a stroll, there was a buoyant lightness in his step. If he came to a gutter he would jump nimbly over it. It was as though the breath of nature had settled in Sensei's body and filled it with her spirit. Whenever I was foolish enough to ready myself with a set of self-styled theories about Nishida philosophy and visit Sensei to try them out, that spirit would turn into a glow within his eyes, form into words, and stand in my way like an impregnable fortress.

But Sensei was not merely speaking in defense of Nishida philosophy. It was just that he would not be lenient with the sort of erroneous critique, seen so often, in which someone seems to be criticizing Nishida's thought but is actually describing his own ideas. As for Sensei himself, it seemed that while fundamentally agreeing with Nishida's philosophy he was at an even more fundamental level holding in his mind what should be called the ultimate critique that would break through that philosophy.

Late one night Sensei, stretched out as usual on the sofa in his study, admitted that the "self-identity of absolute contraries" that appears in Nishida philosophy was difficult, but he said that Daitō Kokushi's words, "We were parted many millions of kalpas ago, yet we have not been separated even for a moment. We are facing each other all day long, yet we have never met," were even more radical. The words came from him so quickly they were like the blade of a drawn sword before it is even yet called a drawn sword. The ultimate concern in Nishida's philosophy was "religion." Regarding religion

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as the ultimate concern, Nishitani Sensei saw in Nishida philosophy that there was a place to which one should advance by taking that one more step that was not there to take. He even said that Nishida who was, after all, his teacher, was "intimidating, even now." I think that the interpretation that went one step beyond his teacher and the feeling that his teacher was intimidating were for Sensei one and the same.

In his biography of Abbot Suger of the Abbey of Sainte Denis, Panofsky, who is known for his lectures on "Iconology," celebrates those great persons of small physique who stand out in history. Nishitani Sensei would probably fall into that category. Yet that seems somehow inappropriate, for Sensei's physique, which is filled with his ideas about "emptiness" and filled with spirit, has something about it that goes beyond large and small. There is a phrase, "A small fish swallows a large fish." Sensei was a small fish that completely swallowed a larger fish.

Would he demand of us that we should go on and swallow this small fish? When a fish like me attempts such a thing, however, I can see already in its eyes the large bones, inedible however the fish is cooked, stuck in my throat.

A Tenacious Power of Thinking

Ôkochi Ryōgi

Toward the end of summer in 1973 Professor Nishitani stopped over in Heidelberg to visit his friend Professor Gadamer. He stayed in the guest room of the research institute, which was next door to where I happened to be residing.

One night the head of the institute, Mr. Fischer-Barnicol, invited us to his home for dinner. I drove Sensei to the house, which was in the suburbs. Mrs. Fischer-Barnicol served us a truly delicious meal, complemented by a fine German wine. Sensei seemed quite contented, and as for me, with the wonderful food, wine, and discussions that fluttered over them, it was a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

After dinner, we returned with wine glasses in hand to the living room, where the topic was shifted to difficult problems of philosophy and religion. This was only natural, since that was no doubt one of the main reasons for the dinner with Sensei. I participated in the discussions, but as the hours passed I