

# VIEWS AND REVIEWS

## The Diary of a Zen Layman

### The Philosopher Nishida Kitarō

SHIBATA MASUMI

NISHIDA KITARŌ was born in 1870 in a village in the region of Kanazawa on the Japan Sea. He was to become the most important philosopher of modern Japan. Whether one agrees or not with his philosophical principles, the future of Japanese philosophy must take account of Nishida's world of thought as its starting point.

Before he wrote his first work, *A Study of Good* (1911), he had practiced Zen for decades. Obviously this zazen discipline greatly influenced the formation of both his personality and his thought. He began Zen practice at Kenchō-ji and Enkaku-ji in Kamakura when he was twenty-three and a student at Tokyo University. Suzuki Daisetz had been his classmate in Kanazawa. Most probably Suzuki had an early influence on him, although Nishida at the time was not yet particularly interested in zazen practice. He writes about this period of his life: "I did not try to befriend my teachers. I did not have any friends at all. I went every day to the library without talking to anybody, read a great deal, and thought about what I had read in solitude."

When at last he devoted himself wholeheartedly to zazen, he was twenty-eight years old. In the detailed account of his inner struggles which he laid down in the journal he kept, and in letters to his friends, we find an interesting example of a layman's Zen practice, and at the same time we may trace his own particular development.

Nishida had the habit in his younger days of keeping a diary and of writing on the second page of the cover of each year's journal, in calligraphy, what he

---

\* Translated from "Vie d'un Laïc selon le Zen," *Dans les Monastères Zen au Japon* (Paris: Hachette, 1972).

resolved to do in the year to come as well as the books he promised himself to read and the thinkers he planned to study. For 1897 he wrote: "A real man should have the courage to look upon himself as an ignoramus and an illiterate person." This betrays his will to attain fundamental insight by religious practice. From July 1 to 7 of that year and again from August 6 to 12 he took part in a sesshin at Myōshin-ji under the Zen master Kokan. From 1898 onward his notes on zazen became quite frequent. On page two of that year's journal he copied these stories to serve as exemplars:

"Long ago, T'zu-ming practiced zazen with six or seven of his friends. It was very cold and his companions got discouraged. T'zu-ming, however, stayed awake all night and gave himself courage by recalling that for the ancients the greater the pains taken, the greater the light attained. What was he, after all? he thought. Although alive, what good was he to others? If he were to die, who would miss him? When all was said and done, of what use was he? In order not to fall asleep, he pricked his thighs with a gimlet."

"If others reached their goal by trying ten times; I'll try a hundred times, if it took them a hundred times, I'll give it a thousand tries."

"Yi-an Chiun pursued Zen with particular fervor. Every night he complained, 'Today was a lost day again. I have no idea yet how to direct my spirit tomorrow.' He never exchanged a word with the other members in his community. . . ."

"When Kōsen decided to study Zen, he swore: 'From now on I am going to seek the Great Way. If in five or ten years I have not reached enlightenment, it will mean that I am just a rotten stick, or a fence smeared with excrement. Then surely I would have been useless for anything in this world and I will hide myself in the mountains and never show my face again.' After this resolution and without caring any more about his bodily well-being, he set out on his search for the Way."

The first week of January, 1898, he was then twenty-eight, Nishida went to Myōshinji to devote himself totally to zazen and sanzen. A monk told him that he had known someone who even after sixteen years had not reached awakening. Nishida wrote in his journal:

"When I heard that, my hair stood on end. Would I be someone of that ilk? But then, thinking further, I felt: All right then, let us suppose I couldn't reach it all my life, so what! If I am incapable or too slow-witted, what would it help me to devote myself to something else! I have heard it said that it took Master Reibun more than twenty years to attain enlightenment." Every day from then on Nishida made a note of the number of hours of zazen he had done. In his diary he wrote: "Master Tōrei said: 'When you sit, seek while sitting; when you walk, seek while walking; when lying down, seek while lying down; when you eat, seek while eating and when you talk, go on seeking. When you work, in whatever

you do, seek while working.' ”

In 1899 he wrote: “I received a rude letter from Mr. X. It made me boiling mad. It upset me all through my zazen and I felt very ashamed. I got up and started to answer him. I was particularly ashamed because of my lack of will-power. That night I could not concentrate on my zazen either.” It was not until the next afternoon that he quieted down, but his heart only recovered its serenity in the evening when he read Bassui’s “Sermon on Zen.” His entry for February 23 is: “Zazen at dawn. Have been very disturbed. I could not help thinking that I have to get on with my studies. I must take Te-shan as my example.” And the next day: “Zazen at dawn—I can’t get rid of the idea that I should not just read ancient texts and other people’s thoughts.” He became more and more torn between zazen study and his thirst for learning and knowledge.

On March 14 he wrote: “I have made a new decision: from tomorrow on I’ll practice zazen for an hour in the morning and without excuse from eight to eleven p.m.” A few weeks later he noted: “Never for a moment even must you lose sight of the koan *mu*.” But a month after that he complained: “My morning zazen has already been spoilt by sleepiness. I am too troubled by the thought that I definitely must read Dante.” Replying to a letter of a childhood friend Yamamoto Ryokichi he wrote: “What do you do to focus your thought? As far as I am concerned, I believe that Zen is the shortest way to such a unification, and if I am unable to do it by this shortest method, it would probably be vain to try some other way. So whether I get somewhere or not, I’ll go on practicing zazen all my life.”

In 1900, when he was thirty, there are no diary notes, no letters to be found. Did he stop writing in order to concentrate even more on his zazen? He started the year 1901 again by doing zazen practice in the hermitage of Master Setsumon during the first week in January. At the end of the week the Master invited him to his room for a talk, about which Nishida jots down: “The essence of sanzen lies in a profound, clean, and single-minded effort. People tend to use Zen for all kinds of purposes. That is a great mistake. The essential purpose of sanzen is to be freed from life-and-death. There is no other purpose. I reexamined myself from the very ground of myself.” Maybe this was the time he had started to think that he might utilize the insights he had grasped in zazen as the basis on which to build a philosophy. A few days later Setsumon taught him a method of “inward meditation” which he firmly resolved to use from then on.

On February 14, he received a letter from Suzuki Daisetz which caused him to reflect: “Suzuki writes, ‘I find my peace of mind in the precept: “However many sentient beings there are, I vow to save them all.” ’ Suzuki has a serene and noble heart! How I envy him. As far as I am concerned, I exhaust my body and soul every day with all kinds of selfish desires. Shame! Shame! My will for the Way is weak. Many times every single day I forget all about the Way. My will

and my flesh are weak. Today especially I committed a great mistake and it is all because I lack the will-power to remain stoical."

His inward struggles were violent. While reading a biography of Saint Paul that April he wrote: "I really admire that strength of character. What Christianity is now, is due to personalities like that." Nishida's interest was not limited to Zen, and he wrote in a letter to his friend Yamamoto: "The Bible is a real consolation to me. I find it superior to Confucius' *Analects*."

In May the journal records: "Several years have now elapsed since I started Zen. Sometimes I advance, sometimes I retreat, I reach nothing. I am really shamefaced." Beginning July he heard about Yamaoka Tesshū and wrote down: "What I admire in him is the perseverance of his daylong concentration without relaxation. That is the way one should be, for it is easy enough to have spurts of momentary courage, but it is permanence that is really difficult." And soon after he wrote to Yamamoto: "Besides knowledge and ordinary ethics there must be the unwavering spiritual fact in confrontation with whatever questioning which may come up. Without that, I believe, life has no meaning whatever."

In 1902, at age thirty-three, the first lines he wrote on New Year's day were: "Five years already gone, flabbily and without results." And late February he wrote himself a code of conduct: "After all, our studies enrich our lives, even if we can't make use of them. Life is what is most important and without life study is totally useless. One should not read too quickly and skip over things." It was at that time that Nishida taught ethics at Kanazawa and was constantly aware of not wanting to get stuck in sheer theory, but to remain in constant touch with the deep experience of the human soul. Until then he had concentrated completely on the *mu* koan, but in August Master Setsumon advised him to replace it by the "Sound of One Hand" which he felt was more suitable for Nishida.

Generally speaking, philosophers, discursive thinkers like Nishida, are not particularly adaptable to zazen. In a letter to Suzuki in October of that year Nishida questions himself:

I believe that sanzen does not help me at all. It would be sufficient to concentrate completely on one's koan and to try during everyday life to keep concentrating on it in order to reach awakening by oneself. Even if the Master tells you that you solved your koan, if you don't feel satisfied with yourself, what is the use? When I think of some of the Zen adepts of our time, people who would not even want to have anything to do with a man of inferior capacities like myself, who pass koans easily and therefore think that they are profound and superior beings, and when I look at these people in their daily life and listen to what they talk about, I am not particularly impressed. How do you see this?

Your letters stimulate me very much and I would be so happy if sometimes you'd give me your views on religion. Although from time to time I am in the profane world and once in a while come out of it, though without really reaching 'That' absolutely, I'll never find peace, even in death. I just wish that you would understand what I so sincerely search for.

This is the attitude of a real Zen man, for it is important not to become dependent on a master: the criterion is within oneself.

On the last page for that year the journal says: "Zazen every evening from 9-11, reading from 6-9. Sunday afternoon zazen. Sunday evening reading." In 1903 (he was then thirty-four), he once again stayed with Setsumon from New Year's Eve for a week or more, but on New Year's day his journal is full of complaints: "I practiced zazen all day long, but sit as I may, I am not able to attend to things seriously. I think of everything at the same time. I long for a trip to Europe, I dream of becoming a university professor. I have all kinds of pains from sitting, and they distract me. Somebody said that one can't do anything worthwhile, without considering oneself already dead. So I tried to persuade myself that I died on December 31st, 1902. But I don't really believe it. The ancients say that one must abandon all things. I must absolutely abandon everything and believe I am dead, otherwise my practice will never be pure."

From then on one finds in his journal various notes about his readings from Dante and Goethe's *Faust*, but nothing about zazen until January 31st when he spent an afternoon at Master Setsumon's hermitage; and then nothing but a note: "Evening, zazen, all kinds of ideas turning in my mind as in a beehive, I am surely not serious." That June he writes: "Just finished reading the *Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* by Ashvaghosha. Often I feel like doing historical research on Buddhism, but there are too many things I want to do at the same time, and I am too keen on a reputation. If I wake up to a great truth and succeed in explaining it in today's words, it will suffice. No other useless desires should be born in me. People who want to do thirty-six things at the same time, end up without finishing a single one." His heart seems constantly to be involved in a tug of war between the immobility of zazen and demonic impulses in constant motion!

Between July 19 and August 6 he stayed with Master Kōshū at the Kohō-an of Daitoku-ji for sanzen. During this short period the highs and lows of his moods are described in his journal. On the 19th, for instance, he was received by Kōshū and found the master simple and informal. After this visit he resolved again: "This time I'll practice firmly," but four days later he wrote: "It is wrong of me to wish to practice Zen in order to use it as part of my total knowledge. I should practice it simply for my spirit and my life until I can see into

my Essence. I should not even think of either religion or philosophy! You, Nishida, left your family far away, and came to Kyoto. Would you dare to go back home without having reached a single one of your objectives, and that because of sheer laziness? If that is the way you spend your years, where will it lead you? The Master has changed my koan again. He gave me the 'Phoo Phoo' koan."

And on the 25th he wrote: "Today and yesterday sheer laziness. My koan has been changed and it had just done me in." The next day: "Today's monks are meaningless, valueless, worthless. What does all the practice really lead up to?" All during his life Nishida went on proclaiming: "Today's Zen bonzes know very little and that is terrible." Until the end of his life he kept a critical attitude toward traditional Zen.

On the 27th he wrote: "Oh how evil, how demonic! One thinks of Jesus' suffering in the desert." As he went through that internal struggle during his sanzen on the 3rd of August, the master approved Nishida's understanding of the *mu* koan. Nishida writes in his notes: "Nevertheless I am not in the least satisfied." Apparently philosophers, whose life consists of "doubts," never succeed in the great sudden Awakening so often mentioned in Chinese Zen stories. Probably a philosopher can never completely abstain from reasoning.

When he was thirty-five, in 1904, he did not follow his habit of starting the year with another stay at Setsumon's hermitage. He stayed at home, more and more concerned with a personal deepening out of his philosophical thought, grounded in his own experience, than in Zen practice. On January 2 we find: "I have often wanted to learn French. I have the impression that of the philosophical works of the Middle Ages the best ones are in French"; and on January 3rd: "I'd really like to read Saint Augustine." A few days later, however, he started to read William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

In February the Russo-Japanese War started and that same year his younger brother Hyōjirō was killed on the battlefield, at Port Arthur. Nishida wrote about it to his friend Yamamoto: "However I may try, I just can't forget the ties that have united us since childhood. Each time I think of it, I find it unbearable. He who left us recently in the bloom of youth, has become part of a foreign earth. One can't even bring his body home. I have just put a flower on the little memorial for him in the midst of a pine forest, the winds were moaning, and I could only cry. Is life not utterly sad?"

In contrast to Aristotle, for instance, Nishida's thought is anchored in the pains of living. He felt sympathetic to the intuitive philosophy of Pascal and Maine de Biran. His readings of that year are reflected in many notes in his journal: Spencer, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Dante, Hegel, Gorky, Spinoza, the Bible, *Kojiki*. . . .

In 1905, at age thirty-six, he began the year again with an intense session of

zazen and sanzen at Master Setsumon's. On January 5th the city of Kanazawa organized a lantern parade to celebrate the taking of Port Arthur. In his journal he cries out his indignation and disgust about such manifestations, expressive of the unawareness of people, of their ignorance of the sacrifices that victories of this kind demand, their incapacity of seeing into the future. That day he wrote: "Since last night my spirit has been very troubled. I have too much ambition left, without any self-knowledge, but there is nothing to be done now than to continue doggedly on the way I have chosen. I am too old to change my ways."

During the school recess in April, he spent another week at Setsumon's, without having much zeal for his zazen, received some friends and went to visit others. Then, on July 3, the diary confesses: "Reading a biography of Spencer, it struck me that even I could probably become some kind of scholar. I am told that James' research is now veering toward philosophy. That will be very interesting." Obviously Nishida's own efforts were already directed to philosophy rather than Zen, but according to the journal he spent another period at the hermitage in July and also five days in Kokutai-ji in the neighboring prefecture.

In 1906, at age thirty-seven, he started the year once more with zazen, but in March he wrote to his friend Hori quite bitterly: "For a long time now I have felt like a country bumpkin. There is no strong personality around, who can guide me and hence my field of research is becoming more and more arid. In three years I'll be forty, I'd better begin to prepare for it now. Ordinary reading one can of course do anywhere, but to undertake some project systematically can't be done easily when you live as a country bumpkin. And so if the opportunity would present itself, I'd be off to Tokyo to live."

In July he wrote to D. T. Suzuki, who was then in the United States: "I intend to continue my religious disciplines till the end of my life. Nevertheless my real field is rather that of scholarship. What do you think? If possible I would like to gather my thoughts in a book. Up till now philosophy has to a great extent based itself on logic. I would like to attempt to base it on psychology."

After 1907, when he was thirty-eight, the diaries only rarely contained passages on zazen, but during those years his *A Study of Good* was progressing chapter after chapter, until finally in his forty-second year the book was published. Yet it was very much earlier, when he was still a student, that Nishida had planted the seeds for this work. At the end of his life he spoke of it retrospectively in a magazine article:

"When I was studying in the Fourth Higher School in Kanazawa, I often exchanged ideas with one of my schoolmates about Marxism and Materialism. He had a tendency to explain everything by 'matter.' I didn't mind admitting the truth of part of his theories, but I could never believe that 'matter' was the fundamental reality. He was not wrong, just all too abstract, missing the essential

problem. One day, walking through the streets of Kanazawa at sunset, among people going about their business, the sounds of the evening in my ears, this revelation came to me: 'Just as it is, all this is reality. What they call "matter" on the contrary, is an abstraction of this reality.' This was the first little twig that grew into my first book, *A Study of Good*."

And on another occasion also, Nishida alluded to this experience: "I have tried to disentangle things and at last I have felt the *immediate* in which I ground myself and that I had felt much earlier. The first time was when I was still a student at the Higher School in Kanazawa. I was walking down the street one day and suddenly I somehow had this feeling about it. It is still very clear in my memory even though it happened so very long ago."

Those ten years of polishing, as it were, this first intuition by *zazen*, and by reading and thinking, made it possible for him to bring *A Study of Good* to its conclusion. But it does not say a word about *Zen*. Scrupulous as he was, he did not really consider himself knowledgeable about *Zen*. If one reads his book without knowing certain passages from his journal, one would not suspect that for ten years he practiced *zazen*. In *A Study of Good* his starting point is pure experience, prior to the opposition between subject and subject and without any separation between intellect, sentiment, and will: "When we are absorbed in listening to beautiful music, forgetting our own existence and that of all that surrounds us, the sound of music alone exists in the world. That is true reality." Let us take a simple example from everyday life: when it is hot and we feel the heat, the "hotness" and we are inseparable. That this heat is the quality of fire, and that our skin has felt the heat, is actually a second phase after our analysis of the sensation. The fundamental reality consists of a single factum: heat, before all other consideration about "us" and "it." Starting from that immediate reality, *A Study of Good* encompasses systematically the distinction between subject and object, reasoning, will, intellectual intuition, nature, acts, the good, religion, etc.

In this manner Nishida deals with the problems belonging to philosophy, but he always believed that the essential problem of philosophy was life itself. Hence he chose as the title for his first work "A Study of Good." At that time Western philosophy moved in two directions: neo-Kantianism (Rickert and others) and empiricism (James, Bergson, etc.). Nishida found affinities with the latter, yet delved in the former for subjects of reflection. All during his life he sought to solve the problems of Western philosophy while taking as his basis the Nothingness of Mahayana Buddhism. He said: "Modern scientific philosophy must advance according to the logic of western thinking. Confucianism, the philosophy of the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes) and Buddhism are nowadays caught in a blind alley."

Miki Kiyoshi, one of his foremost disciples, believed that what is Japanese or



Oriental in Nishida's thought is not exclusively the result of his interest in Zen. Nishida often speaks of the priest Shinran of the Pure Land school, and finds an echo of his thoughts in the historical conceptions of the great scholar of Japanese literature, Motoori Norinaga. Miki also asserts that what is Oriental in Nishida comes out of his own self. *A Study of Good* contains passages that are Western in expression, but Oriental in content. For instance:

God is not transcendent outside of Reality. The Ground of Reality is God. He who has annihilated the split between subject and object and who has unified nature and spirit, is God.

Or else:

The way of knowing the True Self and of being one with God consists only in acquiring the capacity of unifying subject and object.

In such utterances we find something which is Oriental, which never enters into Christian conceptions. And where he says: "The True Self is the substance of the universe," he quite naturally makes us recall Atman = Brahman. For Nishida, the universe is not God's creation, but God's manifestation. Hence, man finds in God his True Self.

Also, for Nishida there is no radical evil. All realities are fundamentally good at their origin. Evil is caused by the contradictions and the disharmonies of the system of realities and these contradictions and disharmonies follow from the decomposition of these realities. They are therefore elements in the evolution of these realities which develop by means of contradictions and disharmonies. One might say therefore that evil is a constructive constituent of the universe. In order to express the deepest unification, God must first to a high degree divide himself. The disharmonies are to a great extent indispensable elements of the unification. Of course evil is not the unification and progress of the universe and evil must therefore not be taken as an aim. The world does not become worse because of the existence of sin, evil, and suffering, but on the contrary becomes deeper and richer through it. As we have seen in his journals, Nishida was strongly attracted by religion. For him religion is the very aim of philosophy; and on it, ethics and profound knowledge are founded.

Two years after the publication of *A Study of Good*, when he was forty-four, Nishida was appointed to the chair of Religious Philosophy at Kyoto University for the year starting in August 1918. Fortunately, one of his students, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, made careful notes of these lectures. They became part of the fifteenth volume of Nishida's collected works. From these lectures, in which he presented a critical review of the theories of religion as they had been formulated in Germany, France, England, and America, one discovers that Nishida had widened the field of his reading considerably and that his erudition had

become far greater than at the time he wrote his first book.

We shall limit ourselves to his reflections on theodicy. He distinguishes four categories of conceptions relative to this question, as they appear in diverse Western philosophies:

1. Originally evil did not exist, hence the existence of evil is merely the result of our subjective view. Hence evil is a privation (something lacking). This idea can be found in Spinoza as well as Saint Augustine.
2. Evil opposes itself to the divine perfection. Hence the origin of evil is outside of God. For the neo-Platonists matter is at the origin of all evil. Matter stands opposed to God and has according to them not been created by God. They are radically dualistic. The human body, concretely speaking, is for them the root of all evil. Plotinus was more moderate: for him matter is the lowest degree of the emanations of the One, hence it is bad. Such thoughts, tinged with Manichaeism, influenced Saint Augustine.
3. The current of thought which seeks to find the origin of evil in God himself may be found in several generations of Western mysticism. Eckhart coined the formula: "Nature in God." Boehme, Schelling, and Hegel show the same general tendency. Leibnitz, although his thought differs greatly from that of the mystics, agrees with them in the sense of not seeking the origin of evil outside of God.
4. In Kantian thinking, evil is an indispensable means for man to advance in religion. It abandons completely all theoretical proofs of the *raison d'être* of evil and considers it from a practical point of view.

As we said earlier, Nishida in his *A Study of Good* agrees with the third point of view: evil is a necessary aspect of Reality. The contradiction is the essence of Reality. The appearance of the contradiction in Reality is indispensable to its development. One may say then that from the point of view of the Whole, evil as such does not exist—a conception close to that of Spinoza.

In the beginning Nishida was inclined to identify Zen with Western mysticism. Later he came to the conclusion that they pointed in opposite directions. His disciple Hisamatsu Shin'ichi remarks, in an article on Plotinus, on the similarities he found between Plotinus and the Zen experience.

In 1928, when he was fifty-nine, this was Nishida's response: "The article is good from the point of view of those for whom only their personal experience is basic. Maybe Plotinus was such a man and then what you say is valid as an interpretation of Plotinus. But from a philosopher's standpoint I believe it to be preferable to find the Principle in the fact, instead of the other way around. From this point of view Plotinus' thought does not satisfy me."

## DIARY OF A ZEN LAYMAN

In 1936, at sixty-seven, he developed these ideas in a conversation with Miki Kiyoshi: "Some people identify Zen with Western mysticism, but I believe Zen to be more realistic, perhaps even too realistic, and rather different from what outsiders may say about it. Zen has a rather strange way of thinking. Occasionally it may become quite materialistic."

In 1943 Nishida wrote to his disciple Nishitani Keiji: "For sure, I am not a Zen specialist. But people in general have the wrong ideas about Zen. I believe that the life of Zen consists in grasping Reality. I would like by all means to see it included in philosophy, but that may be impossible; it has been my fondest wish ever since I was thirty. What you assert I agree with, but if ignoramus pigeonhole me in the Zen category, I must protest energetically. Such people only see  $x=y$  without knowing either Zen or my philosophy. And they are mistaken about both."

His last article, written a few months before his death in 1945, deals with religion. It sums up his entire religious thinking at its full maturity. His conclusion is indeed that Zen and Western mysticism, although very close, go off in different directions. Zen has up till now developed by assimilating all of Oriental thought, but in the future, thanks in large measure to Nishida's thought, I think it is bound to make another leap forward.

After his death, part of Nishida's ashes were buried in the garden of Rejun-in at Myōshin-ji. His disciples in Kyoto placed an unhewn rock on it which they felt represented Nishida's character most truly.

TRANSLATED BY FREDERICK FRANCK