

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 21, 2014

## *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*

Reviewed by Ilana Maymind

Ohio State University

Maymind.3@osu.edu

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:  
cozort@dickinson.edu

# A Review of *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*

Ilana Maymind<sup>1</sup>

*The Kyoto School: An Introduction*. By Robert E. Carter. Albany: SUNY, 2013, ISBN: 978-1438445427 (paperback), \$24.95.

In this book, Robert Carter, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Trent University in Canada, introduces the works of four major Japanese philosophers: Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, and Watsuji Tetsurō. His aim is to make the present selection accessible even to those who possess either minimal or no knowledge of the Kyoto School's thinkers. For the former, Carter provides many citations with references for future research. For the latter, Carter includes a glossary of terms (173-181) to help the novice to navigate the text with greater ease. Carter's expertise in the synthesis of Eastern and Western ideas enhances the accessibility of this text for any Western reader. In addition, his role as a director of the Interdisciplinary program at the Trent University clearly shows his attuned sensitivity to such cultural idiosyncrasies.

To better situate his discussion, Carter begins by providing a brief historical overview and notes that Japan after the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) was transformed from an isolated society into an advanced

---

<sup>1</sup> Comparative Studies Department, Ohio State University. Maymind.3@osu.edu.

society accompanied by intellectual development. The Kyoto School highlights this intellectual advancement. The four thinkers discussed in this book adopted an approach that built a foundation for the ability to adopt, integrate, but also expand and transform certain Western thoughts into uniquely Japanese system of thought.

To address the uniqueness of the Kyoto School philosophy, Carter recalls James Heisig's insight that the Kyoto School philosophy is in fact a tradition of the interpretations of Nishida's works. This tradition sets itself apart from the Western tradition by avoiding any dichotomy between religion and philosophy. The absence of this dichotomy alerts the Western reader to the Western nature of the term "religion" itself. Carter points out that the so-called "religions" of the East were placed into a predefined category according to imposed Western conceptions. Religion is defined without a typical recourse to "belief" but rather in terms of "consciousness transformation" which is perplexing for the Western reader. Carter stipulates his own definition of philosophy and how it fits into the Japanese delineation by stating: "philosophy is, at the very least, thinking that both is rigorous and consistent, leading to clarity. If such thinking leads to self-transformation, then it is in line with what the Japanese believe philosophy ought to be" (6). Borrowing from Carter's definition of philosophy, his exposition of the thought of the four philosophers discussed in this selection is "rigorous and consistent, leading to clarity."

In Chapter one, Carter addresses the thoughts of Nishida Kitarō. To unpack Japanese thought and make it accessible to the Western world, Nishida discusses it in Western terms. The Kyoto school was born out of this initiative. To understand Nishida's thought requires elucidation of his central concepts that, in some cases, relate to Western influences. William James' concept of "pure experience" is one of these influences. Carter demonstrates that Nishida extrapolates James's concept of pure experience by arguing that it is available to anyone engaged in a culture of "the meditative art" (20). The influence of Henri Bergson's

“immediate experience” is exemplified in Nishida’s articulations of intuition. Nishida is drawn to Bergson’s insistence that intuition is more valuable than thinking, which has the tendency to fragmentize and de-emphasize one’s whole experience. Nishida does not refute the intellectual experience but transforms it into a unified experience enhanced by one’s intuition that he terms “‘intellectual intuition’ or direct seeing” (28). Yet, Carter warns not to surmise that, for Nishida, pure experience means abandoning intellect. He explains that for Nishida, pure experience is always a unity and its unifying power leads him to adopt the “metaphysics of becoming,” according to which “the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm; and the reverse also holds” (25).

For Nishida, reality and God are within us. God in Nishida’s definition is the “greatest and final unifier of our consciousness; our consciousness is one part of God’s consciousness and its unity comes from God’s unity” (30-31). The unifying principle that reflects on the process of oneness and is predicated upon emptying oneself of egotistical thinking leads to a deeper knowledge of self and consequently to unity with the universe, or with what Nishida often terms as “God.” This God is absolute, immanent, omnipresent, and “absolute nothingness.” In effect, pure experience is interchangeable with God or absolute nothingness. Humans, however, are also a part of absolute nothingness.

Despite Nishida’s articulation of the merging of self and the other, Nishida does not repudiate one’s individuality and maintains, “the greatest human beings are those who display the greatest individuality” (51). Individuality means one’s ability to be self-actualizing. Nishida argues, “a society that ignores the individual is anything but a healthy one” (51).

In line with the Buddhist tradition, by and large, Nishida views the mind and the body as interconnected and considers any material objects as non-existent apart from pure experience. In order to break the artificial separation between the self and the things themselves, one is to immerse oneself in these things and negate the self. Carter demonstrates

this immersion by referring to the haiku of the frog and the water as oneness of the thing one sees. Nishida understands this oneness in terms of love. This is further exemplified in Nishida's theory of place—*basho*—seeing the form without the form—which underlines not only his interest in intersecting Eastern and Western thought but also, his implicit articulation of the Zen concept of reality.

The concept of nothingness informs Nishida's view of death, which clearly contrasts to a general Western view of death. Nishida recognizes life's impermanence: "we live [our life] by dying" and "die by living" (44). This simultaneous process of our death/life reflects on our impermanence, flexibility, and creativity but also on our self-contradictory identity. Carter elaborates: "How we choose *to die by living* makes all the difference, of course. We can fritter it away, enjoy it, fear it, resent it, or be creatively who we really are in using it up. As sons and daughters of the One, we, too, are creators" (44). [Italics mine.]

Nishida employs the self-contradictory dialectics of *soku hi*—"something other than itself and yet remains itself" (44). This dialectical logic allows for the simultaneous acceptance of contradictory principles. Carter illustrates: "I see the mountains; I see that they are not mountains; therefore, I see the mountains anew" (45). He clarifies one of the pivotal elements of Nishida's pantheistic thought: "The mountains are not just particular mountains; for they are also one with the One: the formless whole is what formed particulars rest within" (45).

Nishida's rejection of any dichotomies is organic to his dismissal of the supremacy of "either/or" logic. Human existence is full of contradictions and Nishida embraces these as "a unity-in-contradiction, an identity of opposites" (46). The unity-in-contradiction equally applies to human consciousness. The rejection of this duality informs Nishida's principle of unity as being self-contradictory as well. The idea of a self-contradictory existence represents a vital, multidimensional world. Nishida rejects the dichotomy between good and evil. God, similarly to the individual, who is characterized by self-contradictory qualities, also

self-negates his oneness by “self-manifesting the many in existence” (52). The self-negating nature accounts for the existence of both good and evil.

Carter explains that Nishida avoids any moralizing: “Nishida’s God embraces evil, Satan, and immortality as a part of His/Her/Its very nature as creator of all that is. As human beings, we, too, represent this same inclusion: hence, our hearts are essentially this battlefield between God and Satan” (53). Notwithstanding this, the inclusion of opposites does not negate a move toward goodness. Goodness, as the direction of spirituality, is “an abandonment of the self as separate,” and hence, “spirituality is centripetal” (49). The existence of evil carries some positive functions since, as the force of opposite, it is energy that accelerates this progress.

Pure experience is reminiscent of a poetic encounter, and Carter concludes his elucidation of Nishida’s thought by stating, “Philosophy is now joined with poetry.” Carter offers his own beautifully composed rendition which is also a warning: “Subsequently, one’s world has changed dramatically, and even to watch the evening news on television makes one gasp in disbelief: can they not see what wonders they are wasting, what they are doing to themselves, others, and the world? Can they not catch even a glimpse of what they are missing out on?” (58).

In Chapter two, Carter focuses on Hajime Tanabe. This is the weakest chapter in the collection, as it lacks some of the nuances of Shinran’s thought, which greatly influenced Tanabe. This weakness is, however, remedied by a beautifully composed introduction by Thomas Kasulis (see pp. xiv-xvi). As in his discussion of Nishida, Carter similarly contextualizes Tanabe’s thought by providing some biographical information. Carter points out that Tanabe’s philosophy developed in two distinct ways: as the philosophy of science, exemplified in his interest in Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology with its reliance on reason; and as his later turn to the “philosophy of repentance.” Tanabe’s philosophy of repentance, articulated through a rejection of reliance on reason and an

endorsement of faith, was his response to human sin of arrogance. It exemplifies how he changed the views toward Japanese expansionism and nationalism that he held during World War II.

In addition to Western influences, Tanabe's thought was greatly affected by Nishida, with whom he had close intellectual connection. Yet Tanabe's views continued to diverge from those of Nishida. In 1930, Tanabe published a critique of Nishida's theory of place, *basho*, entitled "Logic of Species," which was followed by his 1943 critique of the individual, "The Logic of Social Existence." Carter maintains that Tanabe's "Logic of Social Existence" was the strongest testimony to his nationalism. In this essay, Tanabe portrayed the nation as "a manifestation of God" and privileged the nation over human lives by implicitly endorsing the idea of human sacrifice for the sake of the nation. After the surrender of Japan in 1945, Tanabe, who was already retired at that point, was seen as a "'racist,' a 'Nazi,' and a 'Fascist'" (66). The reconsideration of his views came shortly thereafter, and in 1946 he published his famous *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, which was followed by a 1947 revision of his "Logic of Species." In his *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe reflects on his own moral insufficiency, demonstrated by his acceptance of Japanese expansionism and nationalism. This move produced his metanoesis (confession) as an attempt to go beyond reason to articulate the emotion of repentance as a nexus of his philosophy as "a philosophy that is not a philosophy" (67).

Carter avers that Tanabe's *Philosophy as Metanoetics* became his meditation on the founder of True Pure Land, Shinran's (1173-1263), concept of Other-power coupled with Tanabe's own sense of repentance for wrongs done (*zange*). Carter argues that Tanabe's introduction of Other-power into the Kyoto School philosophy brought "diversity, notwithstanding the many obvious similarities" (68). An example of the diversity of views between Nishida and Tanabe is evident in their positions on nothingness. For Tanabe, it is Other-power that represents "nothingness-qua-love" (68).

Carter demonstrates that Tanabe's "metanoetics" (*zangendo*) transforms his understanding of philosophy and its methods. While Tanabe grounds his philosophy in Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism, he offers certain modifications affected perhaps by the influence of Pascal and Kierkegaard. In Tanabe's articulation, this mediating Other-power ensures human rebirth by eradicating human sinfulness and evilness. Tanabe uses the term "mediation" in a variety of meanings, yet the ever-present meaning for this term relates to repentance that summons Other-power and allows a transformed being to "mediate between him/herself and other human beings" (70).

Tanabe counters Nishida's view of human goodness by insisting that humans are intrinsically evil, and borrows Christian language by averring the existence of "original sin" stemming from human arrogance. Given human sinfulness and evilness, any recourse to philosophy or rational thinking becomes inadequate unless it is coupled with repentance. To move beyond finite and evil human nature requires renouncing one's sins and invoking the name of the Buddha Amida (*nembutsu*) for help. While this approach clearly exemplifies Shinran's influence on Tanabe's thought, he goes beyond it by insisting on *ongoing* repentance. Carter explains that for Tanabe, the process of repentance that leads to the resurrection of one as an egoless being is not "a one-time act, for we must practice death [to the old self] and resurrection [rebirth as a new, true self] over and over again" (80).

Contrary to Nishida, Tanabe views enlightenment as something beyond the individual as "a transformative power in the world and history" (73). Tanabe considers absolute nothingness as a metaphor for a "net" which exemplifies interrelatedness. By being composed of tightly connected knots, the strength of each knot enhances the strength of the whole net. Likewise, human interconnectedness infuses each individual with more power. Enlightenment for Tanabe is a dynamic process always connected to a mediating power of repentance. Carter explicates that since "the absolute exists only as and through acts of mediation," this



absolute/Other-power/nothingness is “a process, an action of transformation” (74).

Tanabe’s principle of absolute mediation has other implications as well. It challenges the category of the “particular” individual who is no longer seen as “simply human in some abstract general sense” (75). Carter discusses that Tanabe’s best articulation of this principle in his revised “Logic of Species” which is a testimony to the large overhaul of his earlier thoughts of nationalism. Similarly to Nishida, Tanabe was attracted to Henri Bergson’s philosophy, but unlike Nishida he found his inspiration in Bergson’s view of ethics as well as in his articulation of “open” and “closed” (exemplified by its “clan” mentality) societies. In his 1946 essay, Tanabe reconsidered his own position and critiqued Japan’s actions as that of a “closed” society that overlooked “the greater world that lay beyond” (77).

By and large, Tanabe considered philosophy *qua* ethics, “morality-in-action” which required a reflexive critical assessment of Japan’s image and actions of the “closed” society. The conversion to a more “open” society was a prerequisite for a transformation to “open universality insofar as the individual is now freed to use reason to decide what ought to be done ethically” (79). For humans to be fully ethical, they need to entrust themselves to Other-power by recognizing their own relativity and the hubris of seeing themselves as “the absolute.” The practice of metanoetics alters the relationship between self and another, and one’s relative self becomes “transformed into ‘being-as-nothingness’” (80). The significance of this transformation is in the interaction of relative beings, similarly embraced and guided by Other-power. In Tanabe’s view, ethical society is the society of repented and resurrected humans embraced by Other-power of absolute nothingness. An ethical being is driven by a caring compassion for the entire cosmos emanated from the embrace of Other-power.

In Chapter three, Carter focuses on Nishitani Keiji and discusses Nishitani's struggle with “existential predicament” according to which

human “existence is without foundation and [human] laws, institutions, and religions are feeble attempts to paper over the growing abyss of meaningless and hopelessness” (92). The overriding focus for Nishitani becomes the question of intellectual and political integrity and how to deal with these conditions without “commit[ting] either intellectual or physical suicide” (92). Similarly to Nishida, Nishitani was attracted to Zen, though his interest was slightly interrupted by his serious engagement with existential philosophy. It resurfaced in 1936 in Nishitani’s attempt to balance reason and “letting go of reason” (93).

Carter points out that contrary to most Western philosophers for whom mysticism does not fall into the purview of philosophy, Nishitani was deeply interested in mysticism and in 1932, together with his student and later colleague Ueda, published a book on the history of mysticism. In this book, Ueda and Nishitani grappled with the thought of the Thirteenth century German mystic, Meister Eckhart (as did Heidegger, with whom Nishitani and Ueda studied).

As we already noted, the war brought confusion and challenged the intellectual integrity of many thinkers in Japan. In light of Chapter 2, in which Carter discussed Tanabe’s silence during the war, it is somewhat puzzling that Carter states here without much reflection that, “both Nishida and Tanabe encouraged Nishitani to speak out against the irrational ideology of the time, which appeared to be leading Japan to war, but he was unable to do so, unable to be decisive enough to act on their urges” (93). The writing of this chapter appears slightly uneven and does not cohere well with the chapter before. Somewhat obliquely, Carter states that Nishitani “received a severe blow in December 1946, after the defeat of Japan, when the occupation authorities deemed him unsuitable for teaching” (94). And matter-of-factly adds: “the charge against [Nishitani] was that he had supported the wartime government” (94) and after the war, rather than revising his views, found the refuge in Zen and in his wife (94). Being expelled from teaching has not resulted in Nishitani abandoning his intellectual work. In fact, the period that Carter

calls Nishitani's "academic exile," was rather bountiful, and he wrote *A Study of Aristotle, God and Absolute Nothingness*, and *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.

Nishitani's engagement with Western philosophy was his attempt to rethink its impact through recourse to Zen but in light of Western existential thought. Nishitani's interest in Zen, supplemented by his exposure to European nihilism and particularly to Nietzsche's idea of the "death of God," impacted much of his thought. In Nishitani's view, the "death of God" led to the overall collapse of European metaphysics and hence an overall loss of a spiritual center. On the other hand, this loss accelerated the appreciation of self-agency and promoted the understanding that one's own choices cannot be always corroborated by any assurances of a favorable outcome. Charting one's destination required honesty and courage predicated upon a "will to power." Carter explains that for Nishitani this "will to power" means creating one's own values as being divorced from "fanciful threats of eternal damnation and divine punishment" (96). Western ideas of divine punishment and eternal damnation, which crept into Japanese thought and bred nihilism, can only be defeated "through nihilism" (96).

Carter notes that Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* became Nishitani's spiritual guide in terms of his articulation of nihilism. In his *Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, Nishitani equates Nietzsche's pronouncement of the "death of God" with the death of Christianity and further with the death of Christian values and the meaninglessness of human existence. In Nishitani's elaboration, the death of God was replaced with the "love of self and the world just as they are" (97). This replacement released humans from a perception of sinfulness and transformed them into "proud, powerful, erotic beings who loved life and were capable of creating meaning and values for themselves" (97).

Carter notes that the notion of "nothingness" is often misinterpreted by the West as "the negation of some being of some kind" (109). Perhaps turning to the elucidation of this concept earlier in the book

would have helped the reader to understand better the complexity of the Kyoto School thought. Carter explains that for the thinkers of the Kyoto School “nothingness” meant, “that which was originary, ultimate, or absolute” (109). He warns the reader not to conflate the meaning of this concept into one. Carter provides a short comparative elucidation of the notion of nothingness as understood by the philosophers discussed in his book. This quick foray aims to ensure a more nuanced understanding; however, it might have served this purpose better in the introduction chapter.

In this chapter, Carter turns to a brief comparison among Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani to stress the difference in their understanding of nothingness. Carter avers that Nishitani’s main aim differs from that of Nishida and Tanabe. Nishitani’s philosophy of overcoming nihilism is *through* nihilism. To overcome meaninglessness requires “substituting ‘the field of *śūnyatā*’ for the field of consciousness” (111). This substitution cannot be attained without the recognition of impermanence and of a lack of the essence. This recognition is attained through recourse to the “Great Doubt of Zen,” which brings one to an entry point into *śūnyatā* or a world of “suchness.” The ordinary consciousness that depends upon representation is replaced by an unmediated knowledge that allows seeing reality “directly in its suchness” (113).

Carter opines that Nishitani’s ethics is informed by his view that one’s encounter with the other is “becoming ‘the other’” which leads to genuine compassion as “non-differentiated.” The non-differentiation results in loving the other and oneself and means that one actually experiences *the being* of the other. And yet, for Nishitani, while the differences between the self and the other vanish, the individuality of the one and the other remains. Carter explains, “The maintaining of individuality is possible in that each has become the other with nothing sacrificed, *and yet*, because each is in the other’s home-ground, they share the same home-ground” (122). *Śūnyatā*, therefore, is interlaced with *basho*. Carter posits that the impact of seeing ethics in terms of *śūnyatā* is enormous.

Carter concludes his chapter on Nishitani by stating the “the enlightened person acts compassionately by being a self that is not a self” (124).

Chapter four is devoted to Watsuji Tetsurō who seems to be portrayed with a slightly romanticized sentiment. Perhaps the most striking distinction between him and the other three philosophers discussed in this book is Watsuji’s focus on ethics and culture. Carter maintains that Watsuji’s *Climate and Culture* and *Ethics (Ringrigaku)* provides an accurate account of his thought. In Carter’s eyes, Watsuji was a “philosopher-poet” whose visions were “truly brilliant and always thoughtful” (129). Carter writes that Watsuji’s climate (*fūdo*) includes more than weather patterns but also anthropological and psychological aspects of human customs and human behavior. In Watsuji’s articulation, climate (*fūdo*) addresses human experiences that are never applicable to an isolated, atomized individual but represent a shared experience. This claim of a shared experience exemplifies human experiences as being social but also historical.

Carter notes that Watsuji was not interested in normatively assessing human behavior (the “ought”) but rather in human thoughts and actions (the “how” and “why”). *Ringrigaku: Ethics in Japan* is Watsuji’s critique of what he holds to be “the modern ‘misconception’ that ethics is a ‘problem of individualistic consciousness only’” (133). Carter reminds the reader that the Japanese word for ethics—“*rinri*”—directly reflects this social interconnectedness. The Japanese term for human beings, in turn, is “*ningen*” which is composed of “*nin*”—“person”—and “*gen*”—space. The implications of this amalgamation are multiple and alert to the fact that the human being is not only the solitary individual but also a social being situated in space and time. Given this betweenness, Watsuji’s approach is reminiscent of Nishida’s identity of self-contradiction. The ongoing tension between individuality and group membership, as a “negation of negation,” comes into play and brings forth the third aspect of *ningen*.

This third aspect of *ningen* relates directly to ethics: “one becomes a truly ethical being by abandoning individual independence from others, or from groups: one abandons one’s own self” (137). Watsuji’s inspiration stems from Dōgen’s “selfless morality” which leads to an “intimacy of oneness.” This “intimacy of oneness” is the best illustration of Watsuji’s conception of the betweenness; nothingness for him is betweenness that results from merging self and other. Carter notes here an analogy to Nishida’s both/and logic.

As already mentioned, a checkered approach to nationalism characterized the lives of Nishitani and Tanabe. Watsuji was not completely apart from the same ambivalent stance. Carter, somewhat reluctantly, admits that Watsuji’s emphasis on the state and on the social over the individual branded him as a “right-wing totalitarian” (152). Carter appears to slightly romanticize both Japan and Watsuji when he argues that “the thrust of [Watsuji’s] work on ethics lies with *ningen*, which encompasses both the individual and the social, on nothingness as the betweenness between us, and the positive attitudes which the Japanese bring to, or find in, their remarkably fruitful encounters in the betweenness” (152).

In the concluding chapter of this book Carter challenges the reader not to form generalized opinions that overlook the subtlety of these thinkers’ thought. Carter admits that to write an introduction to any complex thought is challenging. The introduction to such thought inevitably leads to a simplified account. Dealing with such complex philosophers as the Kyoto School thinkers who also had to contend with the place of Japan in the larger society, especially after the end of its self-imposed isolation, adds an additional challenge. Throughout the book it becomes apparent that the Kyoto School thinkers were undoubtedly influenced by the Western philosophy and particularly by the thought of such German philosophers as Heidegger and Nietzsche. However, Carter reminds the reader that the thought of the Kyoto School philosophers remained fully embedded in the authentically Japanese thought which

was often aided by their affinity for Zen (or in case of Tanabe, for True Pure Land) and also by certain elements of Confucianism (particularly for Watsuji), and perhaps to a lesser degree by Daoism and indigenous Shinto. Making this factor more transparent from the onset of the book would have aided the reader's comprehension of some of the specifics. In the vein of avoiding any simplified generalizations, Carter concludes the book on a hopeful note that calls to continue a "healthy and continuing dialogue between the various 'Easts' and the various 'West'" (172). Overall, Carter skillfully introduce the reader to the complexity of the thought of the Kyoto School thinkers while challenging the reader to continue his or her search by taking advantage of the multiple sources included in the Selected Bibliography. One leaves this book with a sense of a deeper appreciation of the distinctiveness of the Kyoto School thinkers and their struggle to elucidate what Nishida terms as "unspeakable."