

Nishida Kitarō

(1870–1945)

It is no exaggeration to say that in him [Nishida Kitarō] Japan has had the first philosophical genius who knew how to build a system permeated with the spirit of Buddhist meditation, by fully employing the Western method of thinking.

—Takeuchi Yoshinori, “The Philosophy of Nishida,”
in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*

Background

At about the same time that Japanese men were sent to the West to study the centuries of advances made since the closing of Japan, a small but steady flow of Western academics came to Japan to teach Western ideas and accomplishments. Two German philosophers who taught in Japan (Ludwig Busse and Raphael von Koeber) contributed to the trend toward German “romantic” philosophy and away from the increasingly less popular English philosophers (J. S. Mill, Spencer, Darwin, and Huxley). The affinity that the Japanese had for German authors continued well into the twentieth century: Martin Heidegger’s *Zein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), for example, was translated into Japanese before it was translated into English, and upon Heidegger’s death, the national radio service, NHK, broadcast a tribute to Heidegger that was several minutes in length. It was in this intellectual climate that Nishida was educated.

Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Hartmann were key figures in the rush to understand the West and its ways. Yet, as James Heisig observes, Nishida “did not simply seek to *preserve* Japan’s traditional self-understanding in the face of the onslaught of foreign ideas and ideals, but to submit it to the rigorous critique of philosophy.”¹

The account of Nishida’s philosophy that follows is not meant to be complete, but only introduces the reader to the thought of this foundational thinker by drawing out some of the major themes in his lifelong pursuit. The early Nishida is dominant in this account, although themes from his middle and later periods are also present. As a questing philosopher, he continued to rewrite his position time after time, trying to overcome shortcomings or simply reviewing an issue from a new perspective. His first period was dominated by the notion of “pure experience”; his second by “self-consciousness”; his third by the notion of *basho*, or *topos* (a notion that he borrowed from Plato), perhaps best rendered in English as “place,” or “field” (as in “field theory”), or simply as that in which something is located; and the fourth by the complex notion of “the absolutely contradictorily self-identical dialectical world of the one and the many.”² Not only does much of the material from the middle and later periods remain untranslated, but these writings tend to be extremely dense and notoriously difficult to read. Thus, while I think that the following account of Nishida’s philosophy is accurate, it represents but a small portion of his thinking and rethinking about issues that continue to reverberate in the minds of scholars the world over. The point is that readers should not be misled into thinking that they “know” Nishida’s philosophy from reading this account. What I have tried to provide is a basic look at the greatness which he created.

What Nishida took to be Japan’s traditional self-understanding was a perspective heavily colored by his own interest in Zen Buddhism. Noda Mateo reported that Nishida often stated in his lectures that his aim was to establish “a rational foundation for Zen.”³ Having been a practitioner of Zen for a decade from his mid-twenties, and even though his philosophic writings hardly

make mention of Zen, one must assume that his aim continued to include an acceptable rendering of the Zen perspective, although he often remarked that his philosophy was not tied to that perspective. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Zen continued to provide the lens through which he saw the world.

The Early Years: Education

Nishida's secondary education included an intense study of Chinese language and literature, and mathematics. While he did well, he increasingly felt stunted by militaristic and rule-oriented administrators. Nonetheless, he found some excellent teachers and studied a wide range of subjects including Japanese, Chinese, English, German, history, mathematics, geology, physics, and physical education. As he developed intellectually, he was torn between mathematics and philosophy, eventually selecting philosophy as his focus. In July 1889, he learned that he had failed his first year of the main division because of his poor class attendance and bad classroom conduct, although his academic achievement was not in question. Unwisely, he decided to drop out of school in 1890, unhappy with the constraints imposed on students and intent on self-learning. He read incessantly on his own but, in doing so, damaged his eyes to the extent that he was ordered by his doctor not to read for a year. It was becoming more and more clear that educating himself was not the realization of the ideal of freedom that he sought. He needed the guidance of strong, educated minds, and the requirements of ordered learning.

Realizing that trying to educate himself on his own was more difficult than he had thought, in 1891 Nishida took the entrance examination to apply to become a "limited status" student at Tokyo University, the reduced standing being the direct result of having dropped out of high school before completing the requirements. He found the exam for this "second best" academic entrance easy and was admitted to the Department of Philosophy. In 1894 he wrote a graduation thesis on Hume's theory of causation. After

graduating, he was unable to find a teaching job either in Tokyo or his hometown of Kanazawa and spent the rest of 1894 unemployed. He used the time to compose an essay on T. H. Green's theory of ethics, which was published in three installments in 1895 in the "Education Times."

In 1897 Nishida acquired a job as head teacher at the branch campus of a Middle School in Nanao, which was about sixty kilometers northeast of Kanazawa. His duties included walking great distances in an attempt to attract students to the school. In that same year he married his cousin, Takuda Kotomi. Later that year politicians voted to close the school, and in 1896 Nishida obtained a position as instructor in German at his old school in Kanazawa, the Fourth Higher School. That same year also marks the birth of their first child, a girl whom they named Yayoi.

Nishida's new status as a father, now responsible for supporting a family, seemed to push him toward a more intense practice of Zen. But it was not an easy time for him, for his wife abruptly left with Yayoi, and as a result of this their parents ordered them to be separated for an unspecified time. Furthermore, on the teaching front, Nishida was dismissed due to a "reorganization of the teaching staff" by the Ministry of Education, the result of internal disagreements at the school. He spent much of the summer that year in intense Zen practice in Kyoto. To practice Zen one had to meditate for long hours each week at the monastery. It required diligence and endurance. News came at the end of his intensive Zen involvement that a one-year teaching position in German, in Yamaguchi, a rural community at the southwestern end of the main island of Honshu, was his if he wanted it. A year later he returned to a position in philosophy and German at the Fourth Higher School in Kanazawa. He and his wife and child were reunited, and a second child was born, a son whom they named Ken. All the while Nishida continued his Zen practice. Yusa's translation of Nishida's letter to a friend, on September 15, 1899, makes evident that he struggled with his many duties, family life, and Zen practice: "I'm ashamed that I have made very little progress in my Zen practice. Although I want to, it is really hard to practice Zen

when I have a job in the outside world and a wife and children at home.”⁴ In another letter he makes plain his determination: “so regardless of whether I attained awakening or not, I intend to continue practicing Zen for the rest of my life.”⁵ To “awaken” in Zen means to break through the surface level of awareness, to a deeper level of self-awareness: to knowing who you really are, one might say. In 1903 he finally passed his *kōan* (*mu*, emptiness, nothingness—a *kōan* is a mental puzzle one is given as a challenge to solve, except that it has no mental or intellectual solution) and had his *kenshō* (seeing into one’s true nature) experience.

In 1904, his brother Kyōjirō was killed in battle in the Russo-Japanese war, leaving a wife and child. While it took Nishida a long time to recover from this loss, nonetheless he saw to it that a husband was found for the widow, and he and Katomi adopted the child, raising her as their own. While Zen once again proved a comfort to him through a lengthy depression, it was at this time that he ended his formal practice of Zen. He now gave his full attention to philosophy and, in particular, to the study of ethics. His attention also turned to reading on psychology and to the writing of an essay entitled “Pure experience, cognition, will, and intellectual intuition,” which became part one of his first book.⁶

In 1909 Nishida accepted a position teaching philosophy at Gakushōn University, in Tokyo. Nine months later he was appointed lecturer at Kyoto Imperial University, where he remained until his retirement in 1928. His career at Kyoto University was an illustrious one. In 1913 he was awarded the Doctor of Arts, granted tenure, and promoted to full professor. Through it all his melancholy personality was severely tested by a string of family tragedies: he himself succumbed to several lengthy bouts of illness. But in addition, “in 1918 his mother Tosa died at seventy-seven years of age. In 1919 his first wife Kotomi suffered a brain hemorrhage and was confined to bed in a paralyzed state. In 1920 their eldest son died of acute appendicitis at twenty-three years of age. In 1921 and 1922 their second, fourth, and sixth daughters were stricken with typhus. On January 23, 1925, Kotomi died. Six of his children

were to die before him. These difficult years served to deepen Nishida's philosophical and personal integration acquired through his Zen training. His later writings featured the point that true religion and true philosophy issue forth from personal suffering.⁷

Pure Experience

It was in 1904 that Nishida read William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, finding it a "deep and delightful" work.⁸ He took from James not only the term "pure experience," but also James's insistence on grounding philosophy on experience, rather than abstract theory. These insights would provide Nishida with the seminal concepts for his early work, and remained foundational insights for Nishida throughout his philosophical career. He took James's "radical empiricism" to be confirmation that all empiricism ought to be experientially based, that is, that the temptation to add nonexperiential ideas to an empirical philosophy ought to be avoided. It also meant that ideas that were grounded in experience must be included in any empirical philosophy. Hence, the Zen experiences of seeing into one's true nature and enlightenment were also empirical matters that had to be included in a truly empirical philosophy. Both James and Nishida doubted the adequacy of the intellect and its concept formation to deliver a true picture of the complexity of everyday human experience. Together with the fact that concepts are already once removed in our attempt to "represent" experience, James further argued that "experience *as experience* outstrips our capacity to conceptually or linguistically articulate it."⁹ James posited a "primal stuff," a "big blooming buzzing confusion," and out of "this aboriginal sensible muchness attention carves out objects, which conception then names and identifies forever—in the sky 'constellations,' on the earth 'beach,' 'sea,' 'cliff,' 'bushes,' 'grass.' Out of time we cut 'days,' 'nights,' 'summers' and 'winters.'"¹⁰ As Edward Moore puts it, for James "the world consists of a flux of pure experience out of which man—by observation and inspiration—carves isolable chunks to which he gives names.

These chunks have no identity in reality as chunks. They are simply artificial cuts out of what is in reality a continuum.”¹¹

For his part, Nishida maintained that “meanings and judgments are an abstracted part of the original experience, and compared with the actual experience they are meager in content.”¹² James called concepts “static abstractions” taken from the original “given” in experience: concepts are like the “perchings” of birds in flight, just temporary resting places chosen to stop the incessant flight of experience. Concepts are fixations on a limited aspect of that flow for practical purposes. But there are more smells, colors, textures, and shapes in experience than we have names for. The color chips in a paint store, for example, while outstripping previously limited color choices, can never reach a full display of the infinite color variations possible. Each color chosen is a static fixation on one point in the color spectrum, while the additional experiences of color variations are inexhaustible. If texture and shape are added to the mix, the possibilities expand exponentially. Furthermore, as Zen training makes apparent, to divest oneself of concepts, meanings, judgments, and other mental additions renders one capable of “just experiencing.” Taken to its goal, learning to just experience is to encounter reality as it is, and to experience one’s “deep” or “real” self, just as it is. As Krueger explains, “Pure experience for Nishida is both the primordial foundation of consciousness *and* the ultimate ground of all reality,” as absolute nothingness.¹³ The aim of Zen training is to become one with ultimate reality in the sense that one comes to “grasp” the oneness of all things, a unity that is ineffable, unspeakable, because it is what it is prior to all distinctions, all carvings and conceptual fixations. It has no qualities, characteristics, or form. If followed far enough, pure experience ends in enlightenment, the awareness of the primal flow of reality as it is prior to all intellectual impositions upon it. To grasp this ineffable oneness is to understand that all things that exist are but manifestations or expressions of this original oneness, in which case it is to view the entire universe, in all its parts, as sacred, because all things are manifestations of this one source. All things are “kin,” because they all have the same ancestry. Thus,

the view from pure experience is that of a transformed world: one can never simply see the surface of reality alone, for all things have a deeper richness and worth that far surpasses the superficial surface view. As with Japanese philosophy generally, enlightenment is always transformative.

James did not take pure experience this far, resting content to propose it as a heuristic “limiting” concept in that it brought philosophy back to experience and posited a state of being prior to such distinctions as monism and dualism. But as a limiting concept, it did not need to be a fact of ordinary experience itself. James goes so far as to state that “only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite what”¹⁴ For Nishida on the other hand, pure experience was both given in experience, served as the basis of all possible experience, and was a real and definitive experience available to any and all who followed one or more of the meditative arts. Pure experience was directly available to those wise men and women, in a meditative culture, who sought it out.

But it was his reading of the French philosopher Henri Bergson on “immediate experience” that he found to be central to the development of his notion of pure experience: “It was only after I familiarized myself with Bergson’s thought that I was able to formulate my idea of ‘pure experience’ and publish my *Zen no Kenkyō* [*Inquiry Into the Good*].”¹⁵ Bergson believed that thinking distorts already given experience because it selects from, emphasizes, and deemphasizes portions of the whole of experience. Reason selects what is most useful to us, then discards the rest and, in doing so, falsifies reality as given to us as a continuous flow or flux. “Duration” is the term Bergson chose to capture this unceasing flow of experience. Only “intuition” is capable of apprehending the whole of our experience from within, rather than as objectified as though existing outside of us. In order to return to a true sense of reality-as-experienced, it is necessary to undo the work of the intellect, leave behind its categories, comparisons, abstractions, and part-by-part analysis, and return to the richness and

vibrancy of the flowing and changing experience in its immediacy. “Duration” is the feeling of flow, in contrast to the constructed second-by-second time of the clock. Intuited duration is a return to the richness of the world as experienced, not to the world of scientific constructs or useful abstractions with much of the rich detail removed. Zen, too, teaches that the world as experienced is infinitely rich in properties, and its formal meditation practices have as one of its aims the stilling of the intellect’s reformations of given experience.

To take an example, Zen monasteries often open to children during the summer months. The story is told of a Zen monk ushering young children into the temple grounds, gathering them around a goldfish pond, providing them with paper and pencils, and asking them to draw what they saw. Upon completion of a drawing, he would ask them not to move, but to compose a different drawing of the same scene. This would be repeated several times. Hopefully, the penny would drop, and the students would come to see that there are an indefinite number of perspectives of a single subject matter if one continues to drink in aspects not seen at first. For Bergson, this is to intuit the larger whole of experience from within, rather than prejudging it through assumptions of reason or a simplified constructed map of interpretation. Intuition offers a glimpse into reality that is always changing, thrusting, moving, expanding. Reality displays this force, this energy—this *élan vital* (“vital force”)—which incessantly creates by forming matter as a resistance to which it responds in various ways. Nishida would have found nearly all of this remarkably similar to his own developing standpoint arising out of his Buddhist heritage: the Buddha taught that all is impermanent and that impermanence or change is the only reality.

Bergson’s call to return to experience, stripped of all additions, is echoed by Nishida’s opening words in his *Inquiry*: “To experience means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one’s own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just

as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination.”¹⁶ The years of Zen training that he underwent were years of forgetting—of stilling, and then emptying the intellect—remembering what it is to experience the flux of reality directly. Yet it is not an abandoning of the intellect, for we must make plans and create maps of convenience and discernment, but rather a recovery of that originary awareness out of which reason, science, religion, and so on, carve out their domains of understanding. A map of intellectual understanding is always an impoverished selection taken from an original richness.

Pure experience is the starting point, for it is through pure experience that knowledge of what is comes to be known, and all other knowledge derives from or arises out of pure experience as it is given to us. Experience is an event of consciousness and, therefore, the I (the experiencer) is always a part of what is experienced. Nishida's former student, Nishitani Keiji, writes “that I see with my own eyes and feel with my own heart, or at any rate that I am myself present in what is going on, is an essential part of the experience of ‘knowing facts as they are.’”¹⁷ Nishida offers examples of pure experience, such as seeing a color or hearing a sound. Before one interprets the color as belonging to a “thing,” or as akin to similar colors seen in the past, there is just the awareness of color. Later, one can assign the term *red* to this seeing, and *cherry* to the object that is before us, or that it is a darker red than usual, or any number of intellectual modifications. To take another example, when you first awaken, before you have established where you are or who you are, pure experience is present. Then, you carve up that experience, thankful that you have another day before you, now aware of the day's obligations as you focus on the blankets, the sunshine or its lack, and the aches and pains in your body or a vibrant sense of good health. It could be that all or most of this was available in the first instance of awakening, but was just not yet abstracted from the immediacy of the whole.

What follows from this is that our best chance to grasp reality in its richness is through pure experience. Furthermore, all other knowledge necessarily begins with this wholeness. It is our first

and most basic apprehension of what is. Nishida suggests that “all experience, including such simple things as seeing a flower, hearing the sound of a frog diving into the water, or eating a meal, consist in ‘knowing facts as they are.’”¹⁸ His mention of a frog diving into the water is a reference to the poet Bashō’s famous haiku poem:

The old pond
A frog jumps in—
The sound of the water.¹⁹

The final line could equally well be translated as “splash” or “plop,” but in the translation chosen here, one is left to imagine, in one’s own way, what the sound of water is. Closer to the original Japanese, it leaves undecided what the sound is. Either way, this haiku poem is a superb example of a pure experience. The poem itself is reflective and constructed, but it captures well what Nishida means by pure experience. Before reflection and discrimination, one supposes that there was merely a sound. The heart of the poem is the sound of water: the rest of the poem simply sets up the experience. Perhaps, initially, Bashō was meditating or resting by the pond, or writing another poem, when suddenly he heard a noise. It is not yet a splash, and there is not yet a frog or water in mind. Just a noise. Surprised, Bashō comes awake and provides the context to explain the noise. The mere seventeen syllables that constitute a haiku forces the conveying of the experience in a minimum of words. Ideally, the words will not get in the way of the conveying of the experience. Did you hear the sound when you read the poem? Did you actually experience it as though you were there?

Nishida concludes the first paragraph of the *Inquiry* by noting that “when one directly experiences one’s own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.”²⁰ Prior to judgments, or any other mental manipulation of the original seamless awareness, prior even to the subject/object distinction, awareness simply is, and it is completely unified. Such experience is a simple, single experience. However complex a pure experience is as viewed upon later

reflection, at the moment when it occurs it is a “simple fact,” a unified whole. And it is always in the present. Even memory of the past is a remembrance in the present. Nevertheless, within pure experience it is possible to shift focus of the experience over a period of time; creating a “perceptual train,” and each act of focus “gives rise to the next without the slightest crack between them for thinking to enter.”²¹ It remains a strict unity, as in a well-practiced performance of a musical piece, or the skilled demonstration of a martial artist attacked by a half-dozen fellow martial artists. A strict unity, amid shifts of focus, allows a remarkable spontaneity to arise. Whether a unified musical phrase, or a seemingly effortless overcoming of the attackers, the fluidity achieved is of a single, unified awareness. Nishida cites Goethe’s “intuitive composition of a poem while dreaming”²² as a further instance of a unified complexity.

Nishida maintains that pure experience “is the intuition of facts just as they are and that it is devoid of meaning.”²³ The addition of meaning or judgments about pure experience add nothing to the experience itself, but are mere abstractions from it, or additions to it, as in comparing one experience with another, or taking an abstracted aspect of the experience and comparing it to other such experiences. The result might be, “This is the brightest blue I have ever seen,” which is comparing one experience to another, but adds nothing to the original blueness as experienced. Furthermore, the extracting of meaning and the making of judgments about a pure experience cause the pure experience to “break apart” and, as a result, it “crumbles away.”²⁴ Knowing things as they are is, for Nishida, a genuine “grasp of life” to be gained only through intuition.²⁵

A Unifying Power

Pure experience is, therefore, the bedrock of Nishida’s metaphysics, his more systematic account of reality. We have already seen that pure experience is always a unity, that it may be complex, and that while always occurring in the present, it may extend as a unity over

a stretch of time. It is prior to the subject/object distinction, and prior to the division of consciousness into the aspects of knowing, feeling, and willing. While this unity is a unity of conscious experience, it is, therefore, our conscious self at its basic starting point, but it also forms the basic structure of all reality. Nishida maintains that “since both material and spiritual phenomena are identical from the point of view of pure experience, these two kinds of unifying functions must ultimately be of the same sort. The unifying power at the foundation of our thinking and willing and the unifying power at the foundation of the phenomena of the cosmos are directly the same. For example, our laws of logic and mathematics are at once the basic principles by which the phenomena of the universe come into being.”²⁶ Furthermore, the unifying power at the “basis of our thinking and willing (the world of the subject) is ‘directly identical’ with the unifying power in the phenomena of the cosmos (the world of objects).”²⁷ In other words, while we can never know a flower as it is in itself apart from human consciousness, the fact that we, along with the flower, are self-expressions of God, or the originating energy, should indicate to us that the same unifying power is at work throughout the universe. Hence, I can know the unifying power that is the flower by means of the same unifying power that is my mind, and my perception. This is not a stringent proof, of course, but a reasonable deduction from the metaphysics of becoming which Nishida adopts. It is not, as with Descartes and Berkeley, that God would not deceive us, but more pragmatically, that as self-manifestations of a creating energy, we are of the same stuff, and exist by means of a unifying activity that extends throughout the universe. Thus, the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm; and the reverse also holds. This principle of unity is found in all things, mental or material and, indeed, is that which spawns them both.

The importance of pure experience in Nishida’s lifelong intellectual output is disputed. Some consider it to be an early approach, later superseded by more potent concepts such as “self-consciousness,” “*topos*” (field, *basho*) and “identity of self-contradiction,” representing chronological advances in his philosophic development.

However, I side with those authors who view pure experience as the root notion, significantly present throughout his development, although continually refined and amplified throughout the unfolding of his increasingly mature and complex thought. Pure experience is our access to what is real, and that insight necessarily pervades his entire collection of writings. It also reveals our own deep (or true) self. By looking within, our depth is revealed, as is the depth of trees, rocks, waterfalls, birds, and cicada when apprehended as pure experience. All of these are now grasped in a more robust fullness than when ordinarily perceived abstractly through one or more stripped-down categories of expectation. When the self is free of ego, one is able to comprehend the ultimate reality, which manifests as every thing that is, has been, or will be. Ordinary perception rarely breaks out of habits of expectation, making the richness of seeing things as though for the first time, each time, quite impossible.

Gathering together some key ingredients in understanding the force and nature of pure experience, we might focus on the following excerpts:

For many years I wanted to explain all things on the basis of pure experience as the sole reality. . . . Over time I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience [pure experience is prior to the distinctions of things and self, so the experience had by a self is carved out of the unity which is pure experience].²⁸

Again:

It is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience. The individual's experience is simply a small, distinctive sphere of limited experience within true experience.²⁹

He adds that he is neither a materialist (the view that matter is fundamental), nor an idealist (the view that mind or consciousness is fundamental):

Materialists consider the existence of matter an indubitable, self-evident fact, and from this starting point they attempt to explain mental phenomena as well. . . . From the perspective of pure experience, there are no independent, self-sufficient facts apart from our phenomena of consciousness.³⁰

At the same time, it would be a misunderstanding to suppose that phenomena of consciousness are “true reality.” The better position is that “true reality is neither a phenomenon of consciousness nor a material phenomenon.”³¹ And because reality is always reality for consciousness, and since consciousness always includes feeling and willing, “it is the artist, not the scholar, who arrives at the true nature of reality.”³² It is the artist who does not concern him or herself with subjectivity or objectivity, who, in order to create must be fully engaged in a creative event through knowing, feeling, and willing, and who is ever aware that artistic reality “is a succession of events that flow without stopping.”³³ Thus, your pure experience and mine are the doorways to reality.

Pure or direct experience is prior to all distinctions, including the distinction between seer and seen. It arises before there is an individual self as distinguished from the experience and presupposed as having the experience. It is prior to distinctions of self, other, thing, internal or external. “A direct experience goes beyond the individual—it is fundamentally trans-individual.”³⁴

Perhaps it is now clear that Nishida’s philosophical strategy was to grasp reality through pure experience rather than through experience as already structured by a subject looking outward to objects already identifiable and dualistically separate from subjects, or by means of rational deduction or empirical induction. The way forward is to go back, to the beginning, to experience in its

purest form. It is a strictly unified awareness grasped through what Nishida calls “intellectual intuition,” or direct seeing.

Nishida uses the term *intuition* in two different ways (with a third use insofar as he adopts Kant’s use of the term to mean sense perception. To taste an apple is, for Kant, to sensuously “intuit” the apple’s taste—in this way Kant uses intuition in the way we normally speak of “sensation.” Kant also uses “intuition” to refer to the a priori *forms* of intuition: space and time, while given in experience, are not gained from experience. Rather, they are our contributions to the *matter* of experience). The first of the two terms that Nishida introduces is “intellectual intuition.” It is not a form of sense perception, but a grasping of “ideal” objects, such as the “unity” that underlies all awareness. Nishida tells us that it is an enlargement or deepening of pure experience. But because such awareness is not logical or inferential, some scholars have suggested that Nishida ought to have referred to it as “*creative intuition*,” a direct seeing of artistic, religious, or moral insight. It is related to inspiration, an immediate seeing of a correct conclusion without calculation in any form. It is a state of awareness that has transcended the subject/object distinction, resulting in a unified experience out of which subject and object are carved. The unity that intellectual intuition grasps underlies all other experience.

“Action intuition,” a feature of Nishida’s later work, emphasizes that we do not just contemplate the world, but that we act in and on the world. Whereas “intellectual intuition” is more a *psychological* analysis, “action intuition” involves the body in the seeing and acting mode of our awareness: such intuition does not simply refer to the state of our consciousness, but to our engagement with the historical, physical world. Here, theory and practice are joined together. One is informed in order to act, but there is no space between the knowing and the doing. Models of “action intuition” include the master painter, or master swordsman, who act without having to deliberate. Their integration is such that there is no intervening moment discernable between seeing and acting—all calculation is absent, all concerns about goals or the future are

absent—and there remains only the seamless seeing-as-acting in the moment, in the here-and-now instant.

The Place of Doubt

Since pure experience is prior to meaning and judgment, there is as yet no self and no world. How, then, do these distinctions arise, and can they be trusted? Like Descartes, Nishida begins with doubt, questioning assumptions of whatever stripe: “The independent existence of mind and matter is generally considered an intuitive fact, but on reflection we realize that this clearly is not the case.”³⁵ We cannot know things apart from our consciousness. All that we can know with a certainty that is beyond doubt are the phenomena of consciousness, as pure experience, “intuited” without inference or assumption. Even our bodies are phenomena of consciousness, “for it is not that consciousness is within the body, but that the body is within consciousness.”³⁶ Nishida further clarifies this by stating that there are only phenomena of consciousness, and not both phenomena of matter and mind: “Material phenomena are abstractions from phenomena of consciousness that are common to us all and possess an unchanging relation to each other.”³⁷

Recall that Nishida argued that since neither the mind nor material objects can be said to exist as independent entities apart from pure experience, hence, reality as given is neither a phenomenon of consciousness nor is it a material phenomenon. Reality is an activity and this activity is a unifying activity. As an activity within consciousness, it includes feeling and willing. When we retrospectively unpack the “meaning” of the content of pure experience and make abstract judgments about it, notions of objectivity and subjectivity together with the distinctions of knowing, willing, and feeling are all present.

There is a unifying factor or principle behind all of reality. Nishida’s continuing attempts to put his understanding of the unifying principle into rigorous and precise language are to be

discerned throughout the *Inquiry*. He repeatedly writes of “intellectual intuition” or of a “grasp of life” to indicate how we come to know of the existence of this unifying principle. Such “knowing” is not the knowing of ordinary thinking or of ordinary perceiving. The unifying principle can only be known by becoming it, or appropriating it. It appears that what he has in mind is a pure experience that is prior to the distinctions of mind and matter, and so on, but that reveals the ultimate source of all that is. It cannot be objectified, for while it makes objectivity possible, it cannot itself be objectified. We can only know it intuitively, that is to say, directly. To fix this point, Nishitani quotes Zen master Dōgen (who in turn cites an ancient Chinese sage) who asks, “How do we think what lies beyond the reach of thinking?” The answer given is that “we do not think it.”³⁸ Leave the thinking self behind and *become* the unifying principle. Meditate on it, but do not think it, nor should you struggle to not-think it. Let pure experience come to the fore *without* thinking.³⁹

Put in more religious terminology, remembering all the while that Nishida rejects what he refers to as an “infantile” notion of God as a being outside the universe, affirming instead that “God is the unifier of the universe,” for the universe is God’s manifestation.⁴⁰ Given that each of us is a part of the universe as God’s manifestation, then the unifying power is within us as well, as an expression of the unifying power of reality.⁴¹

In emphasizing that our deepest understanding of reality is gained not through reasoning or sensation, Nishida offers a new kind of metaphysics. Neither rational, nor empirical as given through the senses, his solution is radically experiential. Knowledge of reality is gained intuitively in and through pure experience. It is not posited, nor can it be grasped through the five senses, but it can be grasped intuitively as pure experience. To know it is to be it. To be it is to live it. To live it is to feel the oneness or unity of all things, one’s own kinship with ultimate unity and to acquire closure and joy by having satisfied one’s desire to comprehend this ultimate unity. God is the “greatest and final unifier of our consciousness; our consciousness is one part of God’s conscious-

ness and its unity comes from God's unity."⁴² It is love that seeks unity, and "love is the deepest knowledge of things." Analytical knowledge and inferential knowledge are "superficial," and "cannot grasp reality." Therefore, "we can reach reality only through love. Love is the culmination of knowledge."⁴³

Becoming the Thing Itself

The theoretical aspects of Nishida's philosophy take on a more concrete result when applied to ordinary living. He concludes that what Japanese people "strongly yearn for" is to become one with things and events: "it is to become one at that primal point in which there is neither self nor others."⁴⁴ What is required to achieve this oneness is to negate the self and become the thing itself: "to empty the self and see things, for the self to be immersed in things, 'no-mindedness.'"⁴⁵ The haiku poet who becomes one with the frog or the water, the Zen monk who experiences an ecstasy of oneness when immersed in the glory of a dewdrop on a rose petal, "see" by becoming the thing seen. Pure experience necessitates that one let go of all subjective conjectures in order to unite with the basic nature of something else, hence, "those who have extinguished the self—are the greatest."⁴⁶ One experiences the flower (of course, experience is always in consciousness), but it is within this experience that one achieves union. Union is a kind of love, and this union with an object is, like all unions, an instance of such loving. For, as has been said already, "love is the culmination of knowledge," and not a detour from it.⁴⁷ Here, Nishida is not describing a process that is foreign to those from the East or the West: to focus solely on a mathematical problem, a complex dance step, learning a musical piece, or on making love is an occasion to totally forget the self and everything else except the experience at hand. It is a merging with the "other" such that, at best, subject and object are totally united in a single awareness. While such experiences are not uncommon, it is the Japanese who have refined the methodology in pursuit of such experiences. The Japanese arts, from the martial

arts to poetry, flower arranging, the way of tea, landscape gardening, and so on all have as their goal “enlightenment.” This means that one forgets the self and becomes one with either something or everything. Such a mystical vision, the world over, is a “seeing” of the oneness of all things. But the artist need not be a true mystic to enter into a relation of intimacy with another (animate or inanimate). To take an example, the world-renowned landscape architect and Sōtō Zen priest, Masuno Shunmyo, whom I had the opportunity to dialogue with at length at his temple in Yokohama, meditates before he begins to create in order to become focused and tranquil: “When I encounter a stone or a tree, I communicate with it; I ask it where it wants to be planted or placed.”⁴⁸ He believes that everything that exists has *kokoro*, spirit or, at the very least, some sort of awareness that is to be respected. The Japanese have long held rocks in high esteem, and expensive rock stores can be found across Japan. Not that the average Japanese homeowner communicates with his or her garden rocks, but the status of rocks is far higher there than in the West. Nishitani argues that rocks, trees, grass, and animals may all be engaged in a kind of “communication” and should be treated as “thous” rather than “its,” as an “awareness” of some sort, and not just an inanimate lump of dead matter. He writes that “to speak to a stone might sound like a metaphor. But truthfully . . . the question of whether speaking to a stone or to a plant is to be regarded as a mere metaphor is something worthy of deep consideration.”⁴⁹ Borrowing the “I-thou” way of speaking of Martin Buber, he analyzes that language in considerable detail: “Ordinarily, a second person way of thinking is applied to the relationship between human beings. We relate ourselves to inorganic and non-living things other than humans in a third person fashion, in the form of ‘it.’” But just as we might name a pet, thereby referring to it as a “you” or “thou,” Nishitani maintains the view “that this is true not only of animals but also of trees, grass, stones,” and insofar as a “person loves a stone, there takes place an exchange of communication between them.”⁵⁰ The key to understanding his position resides in language wherein the root meaning of the Greek *logos*, like the Japanese *morotomo*,