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FRONTIERS OF JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY 7

Classical  
Japanese Philosophy

edited by

James W. Heisig

and

Rein Raud



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# Contents

- 1 Editors' Introduction
- 7 The Ground of Translation: Issues in Translating Premodern Japanese Philosophy  
– Thomas P. KASULIS
- 39 Neither Good Nor Evil: A Non-Dualistic Ethics for Today  
– Gereon KOPF
- 58 No Heart, No Illusions: Some Remarks on *Mushin*  
– Steffen DÖLL
- 89 Negotiating the Divide of Death in Japanese Buddhism: Dōgen's Difference  
– John C. MARALDO
- 122 Body-Mind and Buddha Nature: Dōgen's Deeper Ecology  
– Graham PARKES
- 148 Practicing Time: Time and Practice in Deleuze and Dōgen  
– Margus OTT and Alari ALLIK
- 175 Self and Other: A Parallel between Dōgen and Nishida  
– Laurentiu ANDREI
- 190 Writing as Participation: Textual Streams and Argumentative Patterns in Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*  
– Leticia SÖDERMAN
- 207 Shinran in the Light of Heidegger: Rethinking the Concept of *Shinjin*  
– Dennis HIROTA

- 232 In Search of the Absolute: Kuki Shūzō and Shinran  
– SAITŌ Takako
- 247 Nishida's Deodorized *Basho* and the Scent of Zeami's Flower  
– James W. HEISIG
- 274 Origuchi Shinobu's *Marebitoron* in Global Perspective:  
A Preliminary Study  
– Alfonso FALERO
- 305 The Philosophy of Translation: From Nishida Kitarō  
to Ogyū Sorai  
– UEHARA Mayuko
- 320 Between Emptiness and Absolute Nothingness:  
Reflections on Negation in Nishida and Buddhism  
– Matteo CESTARI
- 347 Contributors
- 350 Index of Personal Names

## Editors' Introduction

A significant proportion of literature that addresses the history of East Asian thought makes a qualitative distinction between traditional authors, whose work allows itself to be classified as religious, and “philosophy proper.” In the case of Japan, philosophy proper begins in the late Meiji period with Nishida Kitarō and his disciples, and takes as its reference primarily, if not exclusively the heritage of the West. Given such a view, the “Japaneseness” of Japanese philosophy is bound at some point to come as a surprise: operating apparently within the same framework as their western colleagues, the Japanese thinkers present us with unexpected results and new concepts that tear the architecture of western philosophical apparatus apart from the inside out. We are faced with texts using terms like “absolute nothingness” and “absolutely contradictory self-identity” with relative ease, even if they make very little or even no sense when set within the systems of thought they allegedly derive from. What is more, efforts to decode them with the help of vaguely comparable notions in the western tradition are often vehemently resisted by authors, even though such comparison might otherwise seem appropriate.

The usual way of justifying the resistance, of course, is to claim structural inconsistencies between Japanese and western ways of thinking. At the same time, these very inconsistencies are credited with new philosophical discoveries that can be integrated into global philosophical systems to enrich them and perhaps even revolutionize the way we understand the world. As a cultural “other,” traditional Japanese ways of thinking thought to be religious in nature are re-articulated in a global idiom and, we are told, transformed into philosophy. The tradition itself, meantime, is perceived as a vague generalization, an undercurrent

that manifests itself in the views of various thinkers across lineages rather than as a distinct chain of thought with identifiable influences and internal rules of text production. In other words, tradition is made to seem as if it emerged from brain hemispheres rather than from the interrelated philosophical achievements of distinct individuals.

To say the least, this picture is problematic. The thought of Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, and their followers, even if expressed in a predominantly western vocabulary, clearly connects two distinct thought traditions and merges them into the unique blend that is Japanese philosophy. Neither of these traditions can be neglected or their importance diminished if we wish to understand what they are saying. Moreover, it was precisely in the context of the encounter with western thought that classical Japanese thinkers were rediscovered and their heritage reconsidered. Prior to the publication of Watsuji Tetsurō's *Dōgen the Monk* in 1926, the writings of Dōgen were all but completely unknown in broader intellectual circles. Shinran's work as well was read mainly in the confines of the Shin Buddhist institution, but the influence of these two thinkers and many others like them on modern Japanese philosophy, whether direct or indirect, merits closer attention. We cannot dispense from the work of Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas or William of Ockham in recounting history of philosophy. Quite the contrary, we assume that their contributions have left traces in the philosophical languages of the western tradition. So, too, it needs to be acknowledged that the conceptual system of Japanese philosophy is partially rooted in Buddhist (and to some extent, Confucian) philosophical thought. A close reading of classical texts, in fact, reveals a distinct kind of philosophical engagement, different from what we find among the ancient Greeks or medieval Europeans thinkers. The scale in which Japanese philosophy is composed does not always harmonize with that of modern European thought.

The essays gathered together in this volume are based on papers delivered at a conference held in Tallinn in May 2010, whose goal was to elaborate precisely these questions. The event marked the sixth in a series of international gatherings on "Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy" begun in 2006. It was also part of another series of events inaugurated in Tallinn in 2008 to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of *The Tale of Genji*. Since that time, events have been held semi-annually focusing on



various aspects of the heritage of classical Japanese culture with an eye to their subsequent reception and contemporary theoretical examination. The intersection of these two lines of interest in Japanese thought provided us with a good place to consider its influence, its development, the varieties of its interpretation, and its philosophical content might be made more accessible to western readers.

The collection opens with an essay on translation by Thomas Kasulis focusing on the unspoken and untranslatable background to key terms in Japanese philosophy. He draws attention to a kind of preconceptual “field” that affects not only the identification of particular objects and ideas, but also on the grammatical form of expressing them. He then goes on to apply these ideas to the way Dōgen deals with meaning.

Gereon Kopf suggests a fresh approach to the debate over “Zen ethics.” Drawing on Yuasa Yasuo’s notion of self-cultivation and Edith Wyschogrod’s take of the postmodern saint to reappraise Ikkyū’s rhetoric of transgression and Dōgen’s radical non-dualism of good and evil. Steffen Döll concentrates on the elusive and polysemic notion of *mushin* or “no-mind.” Rendering the term conceptually as “absence of heart,” he seeks to dig beneath its expropriation by modern Zen to explore its variants in Daoist and Buddhist thought and in medieval poetry.

John Maraldo sets Dōgen’s focus on “life-and-death” against the predominant Japanese Buddhist concern with the death of a person. He shows how Dōgen exceeds the distinctions between autobiographical, biographical, and second-person perspectives on death to highlight the all-engulfing time that death makes present. Graham Parkes draws on Dōgen’s writings on the body, clothes, food, and material things for pointers toward more ecological living. He finds Dōgen’s focus on nondual “bodymind” especially helpful for dissolving the body/mind dichotomy that continues to bedevil our care for the natural world.

Margus Ott and Alari Allik revisit Bergson’s concept of time and show how Deleuze developed it to arrive at the notion of “pure form of time”, where the unity of ego is shattered. The authors argue that this notion coincides with Dōgen’s approach to practice, leading to the idea that temporality is indeed the essence of practice. A final essay on Dōgen by Laurentiu Andrei sets up a comparison between the master-disciple relationship in Dōgen and the I-Thou relationship in Nishida Kitarō.

While the former is more soteriological in its orientation and the latter more theoretical, Andrei finds common ground in the appeal to self-awareness as the only way to truly encounter the “other.”

Turning to Pure Land Buddhism, Laetitia Soderman offers a highly original response to the thorny question of why and for whom Shinran wrote his classical work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. After reviewing traditional explanations, she turns towards a text-critical method to analyze the structure of the work and show how it supports the conclusion that Shinran wrote the work for himself, as a personal exercise in understanding. Dennis Hirota takes up the central but notoriously complex notion of *shinjin* in Shinran’s thought through a comparison with Heidegger’s analysis of apprehending and dwelling in the truth. For both, the central concern was redefining the nature of engaging that which enables the emergence of truth within the limitations of the human condition. Saitō Takako examines the poetry of Kuki Shūzō to uncover a religious dimension not often obvious in his philosophical writings. By correlating his poetry with biographical details, she shows how his decision as a young man to become Catholic was later overturned as his metaphysical sense of loneliness led him to the writings of Shinran and Pure Land faith.

James Heisig takes up the dissonance in Nishida’s logic of *basho* which claims to bring us to reality in its most concrete form but in fact drives us into ever higher levels of abstraction. Taking the I-Thou relationship as an example, he shows Nishida’s philosophy could benefit from the theories of the sixteenth-century Nō dramatist, Zeami.

In an attempt to argue the continuing relevance of Origuchi Shinobu to contemporary philosophy, Alfonso Falero focuses on the key notion of *marebito*. Writing out of the Native Studies tradition, Origuchi developed the idea into a comprehensive theory of intersubjectivity that Falero relates to more recent ideas of “the other.”

Uehara Mayuko argues that when it comes to philosophy, translation entails much more than deciding on the right terms to render one language into another. Continuing from here analysis of Nishida’s attempts to open a new linguistic path for Japan to assimilate western logic without forfeiting its native modes of thought, she takes up Ogyū Sorai’s pioneering translation studies on ancient Chinese thought. A final essay

by Matteo Cestari examines the relationship between Nishida's foundational notion of absolute nothingness and the classical Buddhist idea of emptiness. He reflects on the possibilities and risks of using Buddhism as a hermeneutic paradigm in approaching the complexities of a modern Japanese philosophy with its alleged, but philologically ambiguous, references to a premodern Buddhist context.

The editors and contributors wish to express their thanks to all those who attended the conference in Tallinn. The essays gathered together in this book would have been much the poorer without the stimulus and inspiration of our discussions.

James W. Heisig  
Rein Raud  
*15 December 2010*