

PhD dissertation

**An enquiry into Zen as philosophy and Zen Buddhism as a
conscious background, based on excerpts from Nishida
Kitarō's *Zen no kenkyū* (An Inquiry into the Good)**

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Abstract

Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) is one of the most influential figure of the twentieth century Japanese philosophy, and a founder of the creative philosophy that brought West and East closer. When reading his books in translation, it is often hard to believe that the Japanese author has manifold and deep-running ties to the eastern Buddhist tradition. Nishida works with philosophical concepts on the grounds of Buddhist theory, and with a world-view that comes from a context formed by being a practising Buddhist. Consequently, it is imperative for anyone who wants to understand Nishida's legacy to study and analyse closely Buddhist philosophy and Zen. It is especially true when it comes to his major work: *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911). At the first glance, in this work Nishida sums up the results of the nascent German and American experimental psychology (Wilhelm Wundt [1832–1920], William James [1842–1910]) for a Japanese public, but in fact is an autonomous and self-sufficient enterprise. Although the author focuses exclusively on Western authors, the text, written in a period when the author was the most closely involved in Zen as a practice, it is the most appropriate subject to reveal how Zen and, broadly speaking, Buddhist philosophy works as a more or less hidden conscious background.

Aims of the dissertation

The research into *Zen no kenkyū* carried out in European languages has mainly focused on the immediate Western allusions and references in the text, while a few studies analyse also the presence of Confucianist, Taoist and Pure Earth Buddhist ideas in (parts) of the work. All these different streams were organic components of Japanese cultural tradition, forming the intellectual basis for a thinker with classical education, who implicitly combined and synthesised the different inherited elements. Thus an examination that aims at revealing all the fundamentals and structures of Nishida's thought demands a conspectus of an immensely wide material and could possibly be a subject only of a monograph of encyclopaedical size. For an ordinary enterprise it is inevitable that it grasps only some of the components.

I have opted for examining the Zen background of the text, since Nishida was also actively practicing Zen in a period of his life, and thus his understanding of it was not purely intellectual. A deep spiritual experience and the concern with Zen illumination forms a framework of his thought in the form of transformation of experience and practice. Understanding Zen, however, involves an overview of its Mahayana Buddhist background.

I had chosen the first, second and, third chapters of the second part of *An Inquiry into the Good* as the basis on which I have outlined what Zen as the conscious background means in case of a 20th century philosophical work. I have also pointed out how Zen as a philosophy can be traced in such a piece of work. For the purpose, I have used my own translation, which can be regarded as a first attempt at putting Nishida's terminology into Hungarian, and as an experiment before translating the entire work

The analysis of the text chosen as the subject of the dissertation demands from the author the command of a wide variety of academic disciplines, such as philosophy, history of ideas, oriental studies, Buddhology, Japanology, history of psychology, and touches even human ethology. Research into Nishida is also a research into the encounter of different cultures and disciplines.

The argument

In the first chapters of my dissertation, I have given an overview of Nishida's legacy and its Zen related issues and the overall structure of the *An Inquiry into the Good*, with a special emphasis on the passages translated. Here I provide reasons why I have chosen those passages for my purposes.

Subsequently, I advance the concept and structure of conscious background in line with the specific requirements of Nishida's text.

Next, I turn to the issues of *Zen as a philosophy* and *Buddhism as philosophy*. For that reason, I provide an analysis of the concept of Zen wisdom based on the analysis of the *Heart Sutra* and an introduction to the philosophical methodology of Zen through the explanation of another source text: *The Four Principles of Zen*.

I have developed the concept of *body-centred pure experience* to help analyse the Buddhist and specifically Chinese notion of body and the stages that lead to the *Pure Experience* according to the Buddhist tradition. The accomplishment of pure experience is connected to the concept of enlightenment in the idiom of Zen and Buddhism. Zen as an offspring of the *Madhjamaka* school of Mahayana envisages a prompt enlightenment, that is to say, an abrupt and unpredictable transformation of the functions of understanding and consciousness. Nonetheless, Zen acknowledges also a gradual progress in functions of consciousness, where each stage builds on the preceding one, and thus approaches also the practice of Yogācāra Buddhism. Nishida's biography includes both aspects of enlightenment. *Zen no Kenkyū* is written after achieving a sudden enlightenment and during the gradual

conscious processing of this experience lasting for decades. Pure experience in Nishida is *both* an abrupt and a gradual transformation of consciousness than enables one to obtain a sound understanding of reality.

Methodology

Throughout my dissertation, I have tried to resist the temptation to use available western terminology to describe the teachings and various interpretations of Buddhism. Instead, I have tried to stay within the framework of Buddhist epistemology. I was also careful not to break up the harmony of the passages, thus I used footnotes for the translation of the source texts, which is an important precondition when it comes to the independent analysis of a text.

As the principal analytical tool, I have employed the philosophical structures of Zen to examine Nishida's passages. Consequently, my thesis is neither a systematic analysis of Nishida's text nor an introduction to Zen itself. It is rather an attempt to present the encounter of the traditional and the modern *in* the text.

The same passage from Nishida's text occurs sometimes in several places of the dissertation depending on the interpretative framework. In fact, the study could be converted to form a commentary in notes to the text in its integrity. Thus it can be conceived as a preparatory work to a complete commented translation of the entire *opus*.

As many of the Buddhist references and allusions in the text are not explicit, while deciphering them I have made use also of the conceptual connotations of the image-signs as well as the normal usages of the Japanese words employed by Nishida.

Results

1. Formation of the concept of body-centered pure experience

One of the central concepts of *An Inquiry into the Good* is *Pure Experience* adapted from Wundt and James. However, when Nishida interpretes this concept he starts from a very peculiar point of view, which is totally alien to western tradition. Nishida cannot help starting from the Zen concept of the body when he analyses the concept of pure experience. For a Japanese, Zen's aspect is unavoidable. According to Zen, pure experience can only be realised through meditation based on the body. It follows, that the eastern tradition starts from the body as the centre, and returns to it in the end. Having said that, India, China, Korea and Japan all had / have their own ways to interpret the concept of body. In India, there is yoga to

give an experiential system to understand the body. In China and where her influence has spread, the body has been seen and dealt with as a subject of an independent scientific and philosophical discipline, which have formed the concept of *flow-body* (I have used this term to describe the concept of *qi / ki* Chinese/Japanese terminology). This perception of the body is also entirely different from the western perception of it. The analyses of the concepts of *body* and *body image* further complicate and widens the problems of the *phenomenology of the body*.

2. For an “Eastern” thinker, body-centered meditation equals to philosophical praxis

For an eastern philosopher, body-centered meditation means the practice of their philosophy. In Indian, Chinese, or Japanese culture the mental image of the body is completed with a continuously growing practicable system that influences, even operates on, several aspects of the everyday lives of the people. It is enough to consider the realms of martial arts, the medical sciences, or the world of applied arts, but this practice involves the mind, too. It is not by chance that for Nishida philosophy means practice while *pure experience* means practice that is realised in everyday life. It is, thus, an important task of my dissertation to look into the inner system of the practice related realisation of *pure experience* in the sense of the Buddhist tradition. To reach this aim, I have turned to the analyses of the *Heart Sutra*, *The Four Principles of Zen* and the *Ten Bulls (Ten Ox Herding Pictures)*, which help understand Nishida’s mental patterns and facilitates the mutual understanding of western and eastern philosophical patterns.

In order to draw up the structures of the eastern cognitive process that is appropriating a western style of philosophical thinking, we need to define the concepts of *Eastern philosophy*, *Buddhist philosophy* and *conscious background*. For this purpose, Nishida’s text provides the best starting point, thus his passages constitute the basis for my treatment of the question. It appears that my subject amounts to an analysis of boundaries, which requires the delicate methodology outlined above.

My own terminology of the *body-centered pure experience* serves as my definition of the Zen, which has been made possible by Nishida’s concept of *Pure Experience*. Nishida’s legacy is a link between eastern and western traditions as it allows us to understand his perception of Zen independently of practice. In this respect Nishida can be seen a special mediator of Zen towards the West. The analysis of the Buddhist connections in *An Inquiry*

into the Good may validate the concept of *Zen as philosophy* in the context of twentieth century philosophy.

Main theses of the dissertation

1. The *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida's most 'western' masterpiece, which almost exclusively reflects on the achievements of Western philosophy and psychology, can only be seriously analysed by examining its Zen Buddhist conscious background. This is true even though Nishida does not explicitly refer to Buddhist texts in this work.
2. Starting from the implications of Nishida's text, Zen can be defined as the school of *body-centred pure experience*, thus by answering the question 'What's Zen' the archaic tradition and the understanding of western style philosophy concept in Japan enter into relationship.
3. The Eastern concept of body is not analogous to what body means in Europe, but is more extensive as the concept of the flow-body indicates that receives comprehensive treatment in the dissertation.
4. Zen as the practical realisation of the *body-centred pure experience* includes the integrated knowledge of the *flow-body* concept.
5. Zen denotes the realisation of *pure experience* by the term *enlightenment*. It follows that in this system the realisation of *pure experience* is described in terms of two different images. It is a flash-like occurrence and at the same time an experience that comes about by the gradual transformation of the conscious. While analysing Nishida's work and legacy, both aspects must be taken into consideration.
6. While Zen itself is a strictly practice-based method, Nishida's philosophical approach to its final effects is open to be read and interpreted by any reader, thus Nishida opens a unique aspect of Zen to the Western reader.

The author's publications related to the subject of the dissertation:

1. „Megjegyzések a megalkuvást-nem-ismerő idealizmus iskolájának terminológiájához” [Notes on the Terminology of the No-Compromise School of Idealism], in *Huszonöt fennsík: A művészetektől a tudományokig*. Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó (DUPress), Debrecen, 2011, 223–236.
2. “Anyag vagy energia? – A kínai kultúra „csi” fogalma” [Material or Energy? – The Concept of Chi in Chinese Culture] *Nagyerdei Almanach Online Folyóirat* [<http://www.nagyalma.hu> ISSN 2062-3305] 2011/1. 13pp. [PURL: http://filozofia.unideb.hu/na/vol2011_1/8_2011.1_SS.pdf]
3. “Filozófia és praxis: a shugyó fogalma a japán kultúrában” [Philosophy and Practice: The Concept of Shugyō in Japanese Culture], *Nagyerdei Almanach Online Folyóirat* [<http://www.nagyalma.hu> ISSN 2062-3305] 2013/1, pp. 75-88. [PURL: http://filozofia.unideb.hu/na/vol2013_1/131.07_SS_75-88p.pdf]
4. „Beszélhetünk-e imádságról a népi buddhizmus esetében?” [Can one speak about prayer in popular Buddhism?], Hoppál K. Bulcsú – Szilágyi Zsolt – Vassányi Miklós (szerk.): *Áldozat és Ima*, Konferencia kötet, L'Harmattan Vallástudományi Könyvtár, Bp., 2011, 170–179. pp.
5. „A Tigris, a Sárkány..., és a zsoltár” [The Tiger, the Dragon – and the Psalm], *Nagyerdei Almanach Online Folyóirat* [<http://www.nagyalma.hu> ISSN 2062-3305] 2012/2, 62–75. pp. [PURL: http://filozofia.unideb.hu/na/vol2012_2/122.04_SS_62-76p.pdf]