

Homage to My Shakuhachi Teacher, Tanaka-sensei

Norman Stanfield

In my classes, I often talked about experiences that arise from either reflective or reflexive research. The former are moments that cause you to pause and quietly reflect on the discovery that has come into your life. The latter shakes you to the core, transforming you into an entirely new person. You might be reminded of the same gulf of emotional difference between sympathy and empathy. Reflexive revelations make you shout “Eureka!”.

Such was my study in Japan. Although I went there to study the *shakuhachi* and write a thesis about the influence of Buddhism on its music, I came away transformed. I did indeed achieve the goal I set out for myself (research material for a [Master of Music thesis](#)), but in the process I discovered ways of thinking and feeling that were entirely new and previously unknown to me. Granted, I had prepared myself in the years leading up to my field trip, with language lessons and enough courses in Buddhism to qualify me for a minor degree in the field. But the gap between reading and experiencing turned out to be a chasm too wide even to measure.

Tanaka Sensei (b. 1922)

My *Kinko-ryū* teacher/sensei, [Tanaka Motonobu](#), 田中基展 was a major force in that experience. He has been given the honorific title of *Yūdō* (右童) by the head *iemoto* (家元) of his association and school lineage, the *Dōmon-kai* (土門会) of the *Kinko Ryū* (琴古流). (My other sensei, *Toyoaki Kojima Issui*, 児島豊明 with the honorific title 一吹 now head of the Meian-ji Shakuhachi Society, also played a large part. I'll relate that story another day.)

Our once-a-week lessons were in two parts. In the afternoon, I would sit in the tiny replica of a traditional tea room (*chashitsu* 茶室) on the campus of Kwansai Gakuin Daigaku University (関西学院大学), located on the hills overlooking Nishinomiya (西宮市) (near Kobe). Tanaka-san worked on the campus as the manager of the student union building. There, I received traditional lessons (*okeikogoto* お稽古ごと), along with about ten other young men, all Japanese, all university students, all bemused and puzzled by my interest in something so old-fashioned and impenetrable to a foreigner. The lessons were conducted in a traditional manner with virtually no words spoken, only quiet demands to copy exactly what the teacher was doing as he played a traditional piece (*honkyoku* 本曲), one *kata* 型 or phrase, at a time.



Figure 1: Tanaka Motonobu. Photograph by author.

Then we zoomed off to dinner in a working-class restaurant, where he regaled me with copious servings of exotic (to me) food and a flood of information about Buddhism. He was on fire as he excitedly lectured to me about all the aspects of Zen Buddhism that filled his world of sacred shakuhachi. As the thoughts rushed out of his head, he scribbled notes and terminology on our paper napkins, only to use some of them later for their intended purpose. I scooped up the dozen or so precious tissue documents filled with ballpoint pen notes and food stains, and stuffed them in my pocket for study the next day. Then, after dinner we returned to his campus office to replay the day's lesson, but this time with explanations and answers to my Western questions. And more *saké* (酒). The evening would end with a mad dash to the local train station, where I would catch the last commuter train on my one-hour return home in a blur. How I made those three train transfers in my muddled state every Saturday midnight, I will never know.

Sunday, head pounding from the now usual morning-after-lesson hangover, I carefully laid out the crumpled paper napkins and pored over the scribbled Chinese characters at my miniature desk in my miniscule student room at the International Student Society Kokusai Gakuyu-kai (国際学友会) student residence. Oftentimes they were written in such a cursive style that I couldn't make head or tail of them. I would go downstairs to the reception desk and ask the young person on duty to clarify their written form. Almost always, he or she was barely able to identify the characters because they were from the older *bungo* (文語) style of Japanese language; many were virtually meaningless to them.

All of his valuable thoughts made their way into my thesis and my life. Even today, they colour my various music activities and university lectures. He was not a Living National Treasure (*Ningen Kokuhō* 人間国宝) or a recording star; just an inspired person cloaked in the everyday persona of a *sarariman* (salaryman). I still look back on those days as a rare encounter with a brilliant human, a *meijin* (明人).

Tanaka's Buddhist Frame

In the last few years, I have been wondering if I could trace any of his Buddhist concepts to their origins. Given that Buddhism is one of Japan's two major religions, the Japanese people, including Tanaka-san, have a very long history of exposure to the many schools of Buddhism and its vast body of literature and commentary. And of course, Zen Buddhism would have featured in his knowledge, given the shakuhachi's long history of association with Zen at the hands of the original Zen Buddhist monk players, *komusō* (虚無僧). On the other hand, Japan has had a love-hate relationship with Buddhism (*haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀) ever since it adopted Western ways in 1868. The result has been a benign neglect by most of the population, and a fundamentalist fervour among others who subscribe to the old and new Buddhist Faith schools (*shinshūkyō* 新宗教).

My first investigation was directed towards Tanaka sensei's term *kōiteki chokkan* (行為の直観) – “action intuition” – which he applied to learning how to play the shakuhachi and its sacred solo music. The word combination describes a deeper kind of understanding that only comes from action rather than words.

In a moment of inspired randomness, I entered the words in Google, and lo and behold, up popped the expression. They were coined by Nishida Kitarō (西田 幾多郎 1870-1945), one of Japan's great philosophers. The phrase does not appear in any of my standard and internet Buddhist dictionaries. As near

as I can tell, the term was invented by Professor Nishida, although it is a loud echo of the famous chain of four-character idioms (*Yojijukugo* 四字熟語, *Chengyu* 成語) traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma: “A special transmission outside the scriptures (教外別傳); No dependence upon words and letters; (不立文字); Direct pointing to the human mind (直指人心); Seeing into one's own nature and attaining Buddhahood (見性成佛)”.

Nishida Kitarō



西田幾多郎 昭和四年三月

Figure 2: Nishida Kitaro.

Nishida was a member of the Kyoto School of Philosophy that set out to reconcile Zen Buddhism with Western philosophy. Nishida was particularly concerned with finding common ground between Western philosophy and the essential Buddhist concept of nothingness (or, no-thingness). He discovered parallel concepts in the writings of William James (1842-1910) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941). Nishida's Buddhist-inspired writings also foreshadowed existentialism right up to the postmodernism of modern times, but with one important, uniquely Buddhist twist. Whereas existentialism struggled to reconcile the emptiness of existence with the purposefulness of ethics and morality, Buddhism has always made a

convincing case for linking ethics with emptiness by invoking the principal of *śīla* (right conduct, morality, virtue; kai 戒) grounded in *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination; jp. engi 緣起).

Nishida also struggled with the dense Western philosophy of the German Idealists. An example can be seen in Nishida's special take on Hegel's theory of Dialectics (*Benshōhō* 弁証法). But, rather than envisioning a final synthesis after thesis and antithesis, Nishida instead proposed a constant state of thesis and antithesis dynamism (即非) existing simultaneously, without resolution.

Nishida had a profound influence on the intellectual understanding of Zen Buddhism in Japan, to the point where his interpretation has been called neo-Buddhism. Nishida's explanation of Zen Buddhism was to Japan what Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki's (1870-1966) was to the West. And even more remarkable, Nishida and Suzuki were lifelong friends of exactly the same age, who exchanged ideas and quoted each other throughout their careers. Also, both have been criticized in the last decade; Nishida for his misreading of Hegel (Suares 2010) and Suzuki for his "reverse orientalism" (Borup). Both are accused of bending Zen Buddhism to conform to Western tastes and philosophies. The jury is still out on that controversy.

Tanaka sensei also had much to say about nothingness – *mu* (無). He often quoted Nishida, who famously said, "*u soku mu, mu soku u* (有即無、無即有) – everything is nothing, nothing is everything". But he could just as easily have sourced the idea from traditional Buddhism, which makes nothingness central to the experience of human existence. The Heart Sutra (also known as Prajnaparamita Sutra, Jp. Hannya Shingyō 般若心經), perhaps the most ubiquitous Buddhist text in East Asia, says quite plainly, "form is the same as emptiness (色不異空 *shiki fu i ku*), emptiness is the same as form (空不異色 *ku fu i shiki* 色即是空), form is nothingness (色即是空 *shiki soku ze ku*), nothingness is form (空即是色 *ku soku ze shiki*)".

More to learn

Tanaka described a paradox where enlightenment (*kenshō* 見性) is experienced in an instant, and therefore timeless, state, but within the context of the linear thread of time. Tanaka suggested that enlightenment is comprised of moments of great enlightenment (*daigo* 大悟) and little enlightenments (*shogo* 小悟) acting like glimpses into the former. The latter comprise revelations that become stepping-off points to more discoveries. He compared the process to traditional music lessons. But rather than seeing the

musical development of shogo as a simple linear progression, Tanaka described it from two simultaneous points of view – as a spiral seen from the side, illustrating its historical progression, and as a circle, seen from the top, illustrating its eternally now cycle. I have never seen this line of argument in the writings of Nishida (although I'm ready to be proved wrong).

There is probably so much more to learn about Tanaka sensei's research and experiences but we lost contact after I moved on to new vistas of ethnomusicology. Regardless, the bits and pieces he bestowed on me were the "stepping stones" (shogo) to my own growing understanding of music and life, and I have my treasured, handwritten notes transcribed from those napkins and the weekly lessons. More important, my memories of his talks and how they applied to the sacred music of the shakuhachi are as fresh in my mind as if I heard them yesterday.

When I lived and studied in Kyoto, I often walked down a magnificent tree-lined rural path that ran alongside a small irrigation canal in an older outskirts of that great city. The walks never failed to inspire me. I learned later that the path is called the Philosopher's Walk, in acknowledgement of Kitaro Nishida's many strolls along its banks on his way to and from Kyoto University, pondering his own shogo, as I did. This video will take you on a short video stroll along the canal and perhaps experience the thoughtfulness that comes from such magical setting: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LagOIQ8qOxI>.

Postscript

I wonder how many students delve into their teacher's inspirations, as I have done? How many teachers have been asked about the core sources that made them who they are today? A new spin on the familiar world of ethnography, perhaps?

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