

An Ethical and Ethnical Study of “Yes(?), I’m not.”

(The Influence of Japanese Culture and Thought
on Misunderstandings with Westerners)

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Introduction

Foreigners frequently point out that most Japanese people don't say “yes” or “no” explicitly. It also often happens that we reply “yes” to the question in the negative form, such as in the case “Don't you smoke?” “Yes, I don't smoke.”

From where does this kind of linguistic error come? I suppose the Japanese subjectively reply to the opinion and intention of an interrogator, while the Western reply refers to the objective fact included in the interrogation.

In order to understand this difference, several traditional features of the Japanese culture should be pointed out for discussion.

To grasp the tangible world as total

There are many traditional features of the Japanese way of thinking. I think one of the main features of our traditional way of thinking is to regard the phenomenal (tangible) as absolute (total).

Where can we locate “absolute”? It is not found in the world beyond, but within this world—within the phenomenal world.

Hence the interpretation of the phenomenal world as absolute must be one feature of our traditional way of thinking.

In the first place, we should notice that the Japanese are willing to accept the phenomenal world as absolute probably because of our disposition to lay a

greater emphasis on concrete events that are sensible and intuitive rather than on universal ones.

The way of thinking through which we are seeking for the absolute in the phenomenal world has played an effective role in the assimilation of Buddhism in general and Zen Buddhism in particular.

The changeable character of the phenomenal world is of absolute significance for Zen Buddhism. Impermanence is a form of the Buddhahood. The impermanence of a person's body and mind is vividly a form of the Buddhahood.

According to the common understanding of the Buddhist teaching, our life is impermanence. The impermanence of land and scenery is also a form of the Buddhahood. Impermanence, however, should end in some result. Then we have to seek for something eternal and permanent. This is a common understanding among Buddhist followers.

But Zen Master Dogen, the founder of the Soto Zen Sect, said, "The true nature of ourselves is the Buddhahood," but according to him, the true nature of the Buddhahood was not sought through the pursuit of "impermanence."

In the other passage, he said, "Death and life are the very life of the Buddha" or "mountains, rivers and earth are all the seas of the Buddhahood."

That is the reason why death and life are called "samsara" (transmigration or reincarnation) in Indian tradition. So we Japanese interpret the phenomenal world as absolute in a philosophy of transmigration.

The Japanese attitude toward nature

Another feature of the Japanese way of thinking is the attitude toward nature. The love of nature, in the case of the Japanese, is tied up with our tendency to cherish miniature things and treasure delicate things.

Contrast the Japanese love of flowers, birds, grass and trees with the British enjoyment of Beachy Head or the White Cliffs of Dover and the countryside.

Such aesthetic preferences of various nations are culturally significant traits of their respective peoples.

The Japanese have been lovers of natural beauty since ancient days. Occa-

sionally we sing songs in praise of grand scenic beauties.

Even then the grandeur of the scenery is reduced to its miniature form such as Bonsai, or in the case of establishing a garden in our traditional style.

We enjoy nature as it is reflected in our compact range of vision. For example, a poem by Zen Master Dogen, his last words, may be translated as follows:

"In spring, cherry blossoms,
In summer the cuckoo.
In autumn the full moon,
In winter the snow, clear, cold."

In classical Chinese poems we find a poem to the same effect translated as follows:

"A hundred flowers are in spring, in the autumn the moon.
In the summer the cool wind, snow is in the winter.
If nothing is on the mind to afflict man,
That is the best season for him."

Now we shall compare these two poems. In the Chinese poem the word "cuckoo" in the Japanese one is replaced by "cool wind" which gives us an entirely different effect.

The Japanese poet chose the word "cuckoo," whereas the Chinese one the word "cool wind" in the same context.

Both the cool wind and the cuckoo are sensible objects, but while the former gives us the sense of indefinite, remote and boundless feeling, the latter a limited and cosy impression.

A priest named Ryokan composed his deathbed poem as follows:

"What shall be my legacy?
Flower blossoms in spring,
The crying cuckoo in the mountain,
And maple-leaves in the ravine."

In this case we have more of an earthly relationship to maple-leaves than to the moon. Here is an illustration of the difference in cultures; a common enjoyment and the love of nature between the Chinese preference for the bound-

less and distant and the Japanese one for the simple and compact and cosy.

The Japanese garden also typically exemplifies the Japanese attitude of expressing natural scenery in a miniature scale.

There is a Buddhist conception that even grass and trees can be saved. The idea that even insensate things can become Buddha was particularly emphasized in Japan, especially in the medieval Japan.

Such a tendency in thinking seems to be still effective in these days when the knowledge of science is in full swing.

For instance, the Japanese generally use the honorific expression "o" fixed to the names of various objects, as in the case of "o-cha" (the honorific wording of tea) and "o-mizu" (the honorific wording of water).

There are very few countries in the world which use such an honorific expression. This usage is not conceived to be anything extraordinary by the Japanese ourselves.

We should not regard it merely as an honorific expression, but rather consider it as a manifestation of the way of thinking through which we seek a *raison d'être* and sacredness in anything which exists. This kind of expression is quite traditional in our country.

Then why do the Japanese attempt to grasp the absolute in accordance with the given tangible world, or to love nature in such a special way?

It may be because in Japan the weather and landscape are mild, and nature seems to be relatively benevolent to man.

Further, the Japanese love nature instead of abhorring her, and feel congenial to nature instead of having a grudge against her.

Therefore, in Japan nature has been regarded as one with man, but she has never been regarded as hostile to him.

In reality man and nature are quite different things. But we don't think either are hostile to the other.

Worldliness

Now I can locate another feature; that is worldliness. While religions of

the world very often tend to regard this world as the land of impurity and another world as the blessed land of purity, where one seeks the heaven of eternal happiness.

For example, the primitive Shintoism of Japan recognizes the inherent value of life in this world. Each one of Japanese people was considered as a descendant of gods and goddesses, according to the traditional doctrine of Shintoism.

With the advent and spread of Buddhism, the Japanese came to think seriously of "life after death."

According to the advocates of Indian Buddhism, all living things repeat their life-cycle in an indefinite process of "samsara" (transmigration) of the soul.

Therefore, the Japanese way of thinking has been heavily influenced by this Indian philosophy.

The spirit of tolerance

Then comes another feature of the spirit of tolerance. The Japanese have been said to be distinguished for their spirit of tolerance since ancient times.

Although there have been instances of interracial conflicts in prehistoric Japan, there exists no archaeological evidence that there were any violent armed conflicts.

According to the classical records also, the Japanese treated the conquered people tolerantly. There are many tales of wars, but there is no evidence that the conquered people were made into slaves. Even prisoners were not treated as slaves as in other countries. Although there remains some doubt as to whether or not there existed a slave economy in ancient Japan, the percentage of slave servants was very small among the population.

The spirit of Japanese tolerance made it impossible to cultivate deep hatred even toward sinners.

In Japan there scarcely existed any cruel punishment. Somebody pointed out that there existed a punishment of crucifixion in the past, but according to the result of researches by scholars, it appeared for the first time in the history of Japan during the period of civil wars. And it was presumably started after

the advent of Christianity. It was then that the Japanese rulers got the idea of crucifixion.

An attitude toward tolerance determined the all-inclusive and reconciliatory nature of Japanese Buddhism. The ascendancy of Buddhism in Japan was entirely different from that of Christianity in the West.

Buddhism tolerated various primitive faiths native to Japan, but the notion of pure paganism was entirely absent in Japanese Buddhism.

I think deep-rooted was the belief among the common men in the native gods or goddesses to which Buddhists had to reconcile their own ideas.

And finally, there came out the idea that the Japanese gods turned out to be ineffective, but the temporary manifestation of Buddhas and bodhisattvas came to appear in the 11th century.

A Chinese of the 14th century said: "Although a Buddha and a god are said to be different from each other in the body, they are the self-same thing inside and outside."

The Japanese never considered it necessary to repudiate their religious faith in the native gods in order to become devoted followers of Buddhism.

In this manner we brought about the conception of "God-Buddha." It is generally noticed even today that an ardent Buddhist is at the same time a pious worshipper of Shintoism. The majority of the Japanese people pray before the shrine and at the same time pay homage to the temple without being conscious of any contradiction. Such a reconciliatory attitude seems to ultimately form part of Japan's cultural heritage.

When the Western civilization penetrated into the Japanese society after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, those who welcomed it were not inclined necessarily to become Christians.

For most Japanese there was nothing about Christianity that was incompatible with the traditional religion.

That was the reason, it seems, why the Christian culture became considerably wide-spread despite the extremely small minority converted to Christianity.

I think these phenomena were derived from the attitude of accepting phenomenalism or the phenomenal world as absolute.

The human or social association

The other feature of our traditional way of thinking, which I would like to emphasize in this thesis, is the tendency to overstress the human or social connection. In our daily-life conversation you might have noticed it.

A Japanese reply to an interrogation is often the converse of a Western one.

If a Westerner asked, "Aren't you going there?" the Western answer would be; "No, I'm not." But the Japanese reply, "Yes, I'm not."

The proper negative reply to the question "Aren't you going?" would be in Japanese "Yes, I'm not," which is much the same as the Sanskrit reply "Evan tatha" ("That is so" or "Yes").

The Indian language belongs to the linguistic family of Indo-European languages, so the Western languages and the Indian one are derived from the same source.

But concerning the way of replying to the question in the negative form, we Japanese and Indians are much the same.

The Japanese reply refers to the opinion and intention of the interrogator, whereas Westerners' reply to the objective fact involved in the interrogation, i.e. whether or not one is going. Such an example as "Yes, I'm going; No, I'm not going," answers the question regarding his intentions or plans.

In short, a Japanese replies to his interrogator, not to the fact involved in the question. This may account for the ambiguity of Japanese replies to foreign interrogators.

Many Westerners say the Japanese don't say "yes" or "no" very explicitly. We Japanese are led to remark so, particularly because our reply is always directed at or influenced by the interrogator.

This fact is not relevant to the affirmative or negative voice in the linguistic form but to the Japanese way of thinking.

It is, however, a common practice among the Imperial Court in a certain European country for instance, that they should never say "no" even in the case that they should reply "no" to the question in the negative form.

Suppose I'm going to see the King or the Queen, he or she might ask me "Aren't you Mr. Takeuchi?" In this case, I should never say "No, I'm not Mr. Takeuchi," but I should reply to the King or the Queen, "Yes, I'm not Mr. Takeuchi."

Therefore, this fact is based not on the linguistic form but on the way of thinking. What I mean is that the Japanese way of thinking is not peculiar but has something in common with other languages. In any case, this feature is understood as being unique of Japanese language or Japanese peculiar way of expression.

The honorific wording in our language must be also learned to understand our unique way of expression. The elaboration of the honorific wording in the Japanese language has been already mentioned as one of the phenomena ascribable to such a trait.

Honorific, it is true, is also found in Korean, but not to the same extent as in Japanese. The honorific does not exist in other Asian or Western languages, though in the latter ones the feeling of respect may be expressed by using certain specific and polite words.

In Japanese, special pronouns are also required of superiors, inferiors, intimates and strangers, respectively. When we confuse them, unexpected difficulties will ensue.

The Japanese, therefore, bear in mind such social relationships as rank and intimacy whenever they use personal pronouns. The custom of using honorific or of differentiating parlance in accordance with the persons addressed may be called a "decorum" in conversation.

Epilogue

The topographical characteristic of Japan and the love of nature of the Japanese, vastly differing from those of Western countries and peoples, require the Japanese to serve humanity in our own ways within a specific human or social link.

Also influenced by Buddhist philosophy, which is said to transcend worldli-

ness and teach ourselves "Reality is no more than today's occurrence of cause and effect, or life and death," we are trying to realize a Buddhist ideal within a concrete human nexus or in this tangible world.

These factors force us to accept phenomenalism as absolute and take a reconciliatory attitude toward foreign cultures.

Then we try to find our own *raison d'être* in answering "yes," even in the case that we are expected to reply "no," putting a greater emphasis on the intention and opinion of the interrogator, though our answer is in contradiction with the linguistic point of view.

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