
“NO EFFORT, JUST PEACE” :
THE GROUND - LESS - NESS
OF PEACE IN NISHIDA’S
PHILOSOPHY

Yūjin Itabashi

Inspired by both Western philosophy and East Asian Buddhist thought, Kitarō Nishida 西田幾多郎(1870–1945), arguably Japan’s most famous, significant, and influential modern philosopher, developed his own comprehensive philosophical theory, covering the areas of metaphysics, logic, practical and religious philosophy, philosophy of natural and social science and philosophy of art.

Throughout his works, based on his epistemological thinking on our immediate experience of our lives, Nishida sought the most fundamental, universal standpoint of philosophy, which could embrace and comprehend both Eastern (especially East-Asian) and Western thought.¹ Reflecting that this does not entail an attempt either to ground Western thought on Eastern thought, or vice versa, we can see Nishida’s intention to negate – or eliminate a temptation to find any philosophical basis or ground – in either Western or Eastern philosophical tradition.

Actually, for Nishida, as we will consider later, philosophy can be essentially brought about only through a denial of the will that probes for any generally reliable ground; not only in one’s philosophical thinking, but also in one’s actual life. Such a life that is lived while annihilating any ground is, in his early monumental, and most famous book *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究, 1911) and drafts for this book, designated as “peace” with others in this actual world. Peace, as Nishida remarks, does not signify a negative or passive state at all, but only an act of living vividly and actively in the world – even one that is filled with suffering. He calls it “intellectual intuition”¹ or “unitive

¹ John W. M. Krummel states: “The thinking of Nishida [...] escapes confinement or reduction to the dichotomizing schema of “West vs. East””(Krummel 2012, p. 4).

intuition”² as the self-realisation of the immediate experience (this will be discussed later).

Although we can agree with Nishida’s conception of “peace” as an actively lived life, more usually it is thought that it is finding some common purpose – which may be referred to as the basis or ground that brings about a settlement of differences – that can actualise peace among people. Claiming the elimination of any ground in philosophy and life, however, Nishida also considers that a state of peace can be realised without any basis or ground: if we are aiming at some ideal or purpose (even peace itself) that entails some reason, basis, and ground upon which it depends, peace cannot be brought about. This paper will focus on this issue of groundlessness (or nothingness) of peace as vivid life, based on Nishida’s own consideration of the self-creativity of the immediate experience that lacks any ground.

Self-Creativity of Experience

To begin with, let us examine Nishida’s philosophical standpoint, which consists of an epistemological consideration of the world of immediate experience. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida considers that we can neither grasp the nature of matter nor the object in itself in complete isolation from the subject. This also holds true for the object that is the perceiving mind (or subject in-itself), assumed by traditional Western philosophy to exist as a substance independent from, or prior to, the perceived object. Here the point Nishida makes is expressed as an epistemological criticism. One should not consider that the subject (or mind) and the object (or matter) as substances first existed independently from each other, and only later became related; in Nishida’s view, this means that their existence was correlative.

In the manuscripts for his lectures, Nishida says: “Essentially a distinction between the subject and object is never fundamental. [...] Originally there is no distinction between objects and the self, but there

² NKZ, 1, p. 42. While referring to NKZ, all the translations are by the author; for the passages see also Kitarō Nishida, Masao Abe and Christopher Ives trans. *An Inquiry into the Good*, and Keiji Nishitani, Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig trans. *NISHIDA KITARŌ*.

is one field of experience.”³ No independent substance exists, only one fact, or better one field, in which the subject and object are primarily open to, and exist through, each other. Nothing exists prior to this field, and nothing exists in a hidden background. Nishida rephrases this as the idea that, even by thinking or reflecting, “one is unable to get behind the screen of the direct experience.”⁴

Nishida explains such a field through the following example: “Fascinated with exquisite music, in complete oblivion of myself and things, only one music sounds throughout the universe; in such a moment, true reality presents itself.”⁵ When I am listening to music, I actually exist in so far as I am listening to it – not independently of, or separated from, the act of listening. As the fact of “listening to music” cannot be divided into the act of listening and the music being listened to, the whole self is concerned with the act of listening, which is one with the music. In that moment, I do not exist without music. Rather, I exist only *as* listening to music. In the same sense, the only music existing in that moment is that which I am listening to and no other music exists. As such, the music and myself (indeed all the listeners to the music) originally exist only as long as they are mutually involved. As the music is integrated with their co-presence and vice versa, the music and their listening are one and the same activity.

This activity as one field of experience is mirrored in such phrases as “In complete oblivion of myself and things, only one music sounds throughout the universe,”⁶ and “Subject and object abolishing each other, in oblivion of self and things, there is the one activity of the universe as sole reality.”⁷ This, however, should not be regarded as the abolition of differences. The one and the same activity as a field is *not subject to the language of dualistic subject–object or inner–outer relations*. In short, we may conclude that listeners are listening not independently

³ NKZ, 1, p. 45.

⁴ NKZ, 15, p. 190. “One field of experience” referred to in the second half of the sentence is written in English by Nishida. See the newest edition of *The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō* (西田幾多郎全集), 15, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 2006, p. 111.

⁵ NKZ, 15, p. 181.

⁶ NKZ, 1, pp. 59-60.

⁷ *Ibid.*

but cooperatively and simultaneously. While each listens to and perceives or feels music in his or her own manner and differently from the others, there is no existence of music in itself prior to its being listened to. Thus, each listener is unsubstitutable and indispensable to the music as it sounds. In other words, the sounding of the music takes place only as one field in which they are listening cooperatively – and yet there are differences in the field.

It can be said that when I feel the music, my individual feeling or perception presents and comprehends that of another. Lifting the desk with my friend, my physical interaction with the desk is not that of only some parts thereof, but of the whole desk, of which the friend supports other parts. The fact that I am listening to music generally takes place in the field in which every individual feeling or perception resonates with, and is open to, that of each other.

Nishida's statement, "Just as the objective world can be said to be a reflection of the self, the self is a reflection of the objective world,"⁸ indicates the one field of experience where each being represents each other as well as the whole. There is "only one activity," but it contains difference. In the field of experience of one activity, each one's self-cognitive or self-aware act can be realised, for instance, as an act of feeling the music or lifting the desk, which is at one with the act of representing and expressing another, the whole.

For Nishida, this is not a special state, but the fact of our actual daily life as it is, the fact that I am as I am, and being is as it is.⁹ The experience as one field, one activity is thus not just the true experience of reality but in fact reality in itself. In short, this is "the only one activity," and there is nothing prior to such a field as activity. Nishida says that "we usually hold that there is some agent [that is some basis or ground] of activity by which activity arises. But in terms of immediate experience [that is pure experience] it is the activity in itself that is reality."¹⁰ One

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nishida regards a field of experience without a substance in its background as a "conscious phenomenon (*isiki genshō* 意識現象)," which has no consciousness as a substance or substratum behind the "phenomenon." From this point of view, Nishida states, "Conscious phenomenon is sole reality" (*NKZ*, 1, p. 52). For a detailed analysis, see Ueda 2007, pp. 141-150.

field of experience as reality is the only one activity that presents or manifests itself without any substance, that is, any basis or ground prior to this activity.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, such activity maintains a difference between entities, and every entity is directly open to each other, and each of them presents one whole reality. Nishida insists;

“The fundamental form of reality is such that reality is one while it is many, and many while it is one; in the midst of equality it maintains differences, and in the midst of differences it maintains equality. Because these two sides cannot be separated, we can say that reality is the self-development of a single entity.”¹¹

Pure experience consists in the one and only self-presenting activity, in which differentiation and unification are one reality viewed from different perspectives, as Nishida writes: “originally, the differentiation (*bunka* 分化) of the reality and its unification (*tōitsu* 統一) are one and cannot be two.”¹²

As such, this claim is advanced not to raise the significance of East Asian thinking or religious experience, but clearly as criticism that questions the assumptions of substances existing independently of any experience.¹³ Immediate experience, whether as one field or one self-presenting activity, is simply an experience behind which nothing exists. Nishida calls it “pure experience,” referring to the “radical empiricism” of William James, even though, in a lecture on James, Nishida criticises James as treating “the unifying aspect of experience”¹⁴ – in other words, the oneness or unity in self-development of experience – too lightly. As discussed, immediate experience as one field, or “pure experience” in Nishida’s sense, is true reality as *one self-presenting activity*.¹⁵ Such a remark suggests *self-creativity of one whole field of experience*, in which each being creates itself as well as whole, being immediately resonated

¹¹ *NKZ*, 1, p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁴ After *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida develops his criticism through a dialogue with the thoughts of Neokantians; H. Cohen, H. Rickert, and E. Lask. See Itabashi 2004.

¹⁵ *NKZ*, 13, p. 103.

with, and open to each other. Behind this self-creating field, there is no substance or essence, and no creating, unifying function as ground.

Regarding such self-creativity of reality, as he puts it, "by regarding experience as active, I felt I could harmonise my thought with transcendental philosophy after J. G. Fichte,"¹⁶ Nishida expresses his sympathy with German Idealism, rather than James' empiricism. Sharing insight with German Idealism, especially with its critical epistemology and its theory of the self-creative activity, however, Nishida's philosophical standpoint is that reality is the *actual experience itself as one field, one activity without any ground*. He criticises the assumptions of independent substantial existence derived from experience. We thus note that his philosophical standpoint can come into existence through the negation and elimination of the will seeking for a ground in philosophical thinking – and, more to the point, in our actual lives.

Negation of Will for Ground

For Nishida, we usually view reality according to the dualistic division of self and other, which have substantial independent existence. Here we must distinguish between two types of views. One occurs when we recognise the division independent from the one activity and reflect on the independent existence of the subject and object, self and others. The other, which takes the "true" philosophical standpoint Nishida occupies, occurs when we realise the division of self-other or subject-object entirely within the one activity that is pure experience.

As Nishida states, "division (*bunnretsu* 分裂) or reflection (*hansei* 反省) is not an independent activity [from the sole activity], for it is only the development of the activity of differentiation that constitutes one facet of unification."¹⁷ Originally, in Nishida's view, the fact that I divide and reflect upon entities takes place within the self-creative activity of the one field of experience in which each one is cooperatively open to each other and represents others as well as whole. Reflection from

¹⁶ As Rolf Elberfeld states, "Die reine Erfahrung ist somit immer die Erfahrung eines *einheitlichen Feldes*, in der sich das Feld selber erfährt" (Elberfeld 1999, p. 87).

¹⁷ *NKZ*, 1, p. 4.

the true philosophical standpoint thus expresses "truth" inasmuch as it participates in this truth; it *becomes* a part in this unitary self-creative, self-presenting (or self-representing) activity. For this reason, we may point out that this sole activity cannot be explained by or grounded on any reflection, thinking or reason.

"It is hardly difficult," as Nishida insists, to prove that "the myriad things in the universe are in fact created teleologically"¹⁸ and that "even supposing that this fact is proven, we can still think of the teleological world as coming into such being even by chance."¹⁹ Nishida thus rejects the view that reality is teleological. Nevertheless, Nishida's notion of the self-presenting and self-creative activity as reality is frequently misinterpreted as teleological. Here Nishida recognises that, although each single thing is subjected to some principles, the whole of reality itself cannot be explained or given any ground or reason by reflection.

In short, a view or a reflection that represents the self-expressive truth through becoming the one self-representing activity can come into being through the elimination of any ground behind reality, the rejection of any reason or ground for reality as such. For Nishida, nevertheless, we see that each individual has a tendency to set up their "subjective self" (*syukan teki jiko* 主觀的自己; subjective ego)²⁰ as the ground or basis of having their own way in their own life²¹. Here, Nishida considers the activity as attached to the will, which establishes its own ground on its own efforts. On the ground of "subjective self," one recognises the division independent from the one activity, and the independent substance of subject and object, self and other. This dualistic type of division or reflection arises with the appearance of oppositions, contradictions and conflicts between the subject and object, self and others. Then we see human life and the universe as filled with separation and suffering.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ As Bret W. Davis indicates, in Nishida's thinking, we should note the important distinction between ego (*ga* 我) and true self. See Davis 2011, p. 151.

Within such life and universe, as Nishida suggests, “the conversion of self [filled with suffering] and the reformation of life”²² appears through the complete annihilation of “the belief in one’s own self [as ground]”²³; this annihilation implies a radical negation of the will probing for a ground. It also brings about the realisation of the sole activity as true reality; Nishida insists that we should regard this conversion and reformation as “finding one’s true self in God (*kami* 神),”²⁴ or, “just living in God [...] in true religion.”²⁵

As Nishida remarks, “We call the foundation of this [sole] infinite activity “God,” [however] God is not something that transcends such reality.”²⁶ God exists and acts, from Nishida’s viewpoint, *only in a sense*, at the foundation of the sole self-creating activity; however, we should note that, while seeking for God as foundation or ground, one can never realise it. As Nishida puts it: “one sees the true God where even God has been lost.”²⁷ Insisting that God is at the foundation of the sole self-creative activity implies that God is self-creativity; or, rather, the *self-creating* or *self-opening itself* of the sole self-creative activity, just as with negating any existence transcending the sole activity. God is nothing other than this *self-creating itself* through negating any ground.

The denial of the will for ground, the elimination of the belief in the self as a ground should not lead us to experience a fundamental and ultimate existence or essence other than the sole activity of one field; such existence or essence is never in the back-ground of the sole activity. This denial implies the realisation that there is nothing other than the sole activity, in which differentiation and unification are one reality viewed from different perspectives. Here the claim supporting monism that *is grounded* on the only one substance is not advanced. Negating the will

²² See *NKZ*, 1, p. 171.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁶ See *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96. Not referring to Japanese Shintōism as polytheism, but to Christian philosophy, Nishida calls the foundation of reality God that is one, rather, beyond the distinction between one (singular)–many (plural) or inner (active)–outer (passive). Nishida thus regards that God also can be designated as Buddha, in his phrase: “absolute, infinite Buddha or God” (*NKZ*, 1, p. 199).

for ground thus realises the field of experience in which each one realises and lives the true, incomparable, individual self, who represents the others as well as the whole, while cooperating with others; this claim is not subject to the dualistic distinction between monism and pluralism.

Here one lives its own life uniquely and irreplaceably in the sole self-creating activity of one field of experience; that is "the conversion" of self filled with suffering as "finding one's true self in God," or "just living in God." Actually, that which is not grounded behind experience is God. Stating that "one is unable to get behind the screen of the direct [i.e., immediate] experience,"²⁸ Nishida makes a note in the margin: "here is where each one is facing God."²⁹ Moreover, Nishida remarks, "because God is thoroughly nothing (*mu* 無), there is no place where God is not, and no place where God does not act."³⁰ Reflecting upon Nishida's statement that "God is not something that transcends such reality. Just the ground of reality is God,"³¹ God is, in this particular sense, ground, but not transcendent of reality; in summary, we shall say that God is *nothing* as ground.

Living "one's true self in God" means that one's own life in the one self-creating activity of one field is comprehended or grounded by God that is *nothing* (*mu* 無) as ground, or is as *nothingness* (*mu* 無) of the ground; in short, by *nothing* (-ness of the ground) other than this activity itself.

Ground-less Peace within *Being Present Together*

Nishida recognises this realisation of our life in the sole self-creating activity of the one field that is pure experience as "intellectual intuition (*chiteki chokkan* 知的直観)"³² or "unitive intuition (*tōitsuteki chokkaku* 統一的直覚),"³³ signifying "the unifying act in pure experience itself,

²⁸ NKZ, 1, p. 192.

²⁹ NKZ, 15, p. 181.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ NKZ, 1, p. 100. Here Nishida might take the thoughts of Nicholas Cusanus and Meister Eckhart into consideration. In addition, we can find a simirality concening "nothingness (*Nichts*)" in Schopenhauer and Nishida. See Itabashi 2012.

³² NKZ, 1, p. 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

the [profound] prehension of life.”³⁴ “Unitive intuition” is thus the profound “prehension” of or becoming one’s own individual self, which is “living in God” as nothingness. Then Nishida states: “This sole reality [...] on the one side is infinite opposition and conflict, and on the other is infinite unity [...] we call the foundation of this activity God.”³⁵ Nishida thus considers that intuition indicates life in the oneness of unity and conflict, or in the unity in the midst of the conflict.

Eliminating the will for ground, as discussed, brings about the sole self-creative activity, in which each self creates itself as well as one whole field of experience, resonating with – and open to – each other. This co-creative oneness, or co-resonant openness, however, should not be regarded as the abolition of conflicts and sufferings. Reflecting upon the nothingness of the ground, there can never exist some common doctrine and ideal, or aim and purpose as a basis, which bring about a settlement of conflicts in the field of experience. Far from that, facing God throughout as the nothingness of the ground – or, in other words, confronting the absence and nothingness of God, which we can all believe in – radically negates our will for ground.

This co-creative and co-resonant oneness in the sole activity should not be included in some ground; for instance, in a teleological order. Annihilating the will for ground leads us to realise that each event is unique and proper in itself and cannot be included in or comprehended by others. It is true that each event has a cause or reason, by which it exists precisely here and now; however, nothing has a cause or reason for its existence as it is; rather, each being exists precisely so together. Thinking the fact that such an event of *being present together* thus has no substance or ground behind it, we should say that such an event as the one field arises by itself, interpreting Nishida’s consideration of the self-creativity of experience.

Here in the midst of the conflict of interests, even not sharing the same ideal or purpose as basis or ground with each other, but just sharing an event of *being present together*, or, *encounter between each other*,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45. Both of “*chokkann* 直観” and “*chokkaku* 直覚” can be translated as “intuition,” although in “*chokkaku*” the immediateness might be more emphasised.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43. Considering “intellectual intuition,” Nishida refers to “Schopenhauer’s will-less pure intuition [*Reines Anschauen*]” (NKZ, 1, p.42). See Itabashi 2014.

without being able to find any ground upon which we depend, each one still remains in co-creative, co-resonant oneness between each other. The denial of the will for ground causes us to recognise this event with a *bottom-less* sorrow for its *ground-less-ness*, and at the same time with a blessing and joy for its coming into being. It is the very experience of the unity within conflict; in Nishida's phrase, "happiness even in the midst of suffering," that indicates "unitive (or intellectual) intuition." Happiness, from Nishida's view, means the realisation of what the true self wills, in other words, that of the self-creating act of true self not included in sufferings, which can exist in the oneness or unity within conflicts.

In his draft for *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida then describes "intellectual intuition (*chiteki chokkaku* 知的直覚) is [...] no effort, but peace [*heiwa* 平和]."³⁶ "Happiness even in the midst of suffering," as considered, is itself not included in and comprehend by sufferings, and in this sense, we can call this happiness "peace." Realizing this "peace," as Nishida's words quoted above, we do not need any effort; effort is an act that will attain some ideal or purpose by its own, then as far as we exert effort, it signifies that we depend upon our own abilities as basis or ground independent from others. Opposed to that, we need to eliminate any efforts, any will probing for a ground. As Nishida remarks, the realisation of each life in the sole activity of one field, or living in God as nothingness of the ground, is "no effort, just peace." Moreover, such peace actualises not a negative, apathetic life about conflicts and suffering, but a vivid, active life facing them; as Nishida states, "belief in God [that is life in God] is [...] intuition with vital power [of living one's true life],"³⁷ or, in unitive intuition, "there is stillness [but] within movement (*dō chūni seiari* 動中に静あり)."³⁸ Unitive intuition, as above, entails that in the midst of conflicts each one realises itself in the co-creative, co-resonant unity through sharing *being present together or encounter between each other without ground* in the field of experience. This intuition must not be the will escaping from conflicts and

³⁶ NKZ, 16, p. 323.

³⁷ NKZ, 1, p. 177.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

sufferings. Negating the will seeking for a ground brings about directly, without any effort, the willingness to embrace conflicts and sufferings, in order not to encourage them to hinder the unity, as *being present together*. Unitive intuition realises itself, not as an act of effort, but just as *being oneself together ground-lessly*, that is the co-creative, co-resonant unity among us in the one field.

Conclusion

Tracing his thinking, we see Nishida's inquiry into our life, based on his consideration on the self-creativity of the sole activity, the one field of immediate experience. As we considered earlier, our actual experience is that which can arise as one field; it is precisely the only one self-creative activity behind which no substance and ground exist. Then, however, we came to the problem of how to live in the midst of conflicts and sufferings that appear in the sole self-creative activity: then we saw that negation or elimination of the will that probes for a ground brings about the unity of the sole activity of one field within conflicts and sufferings.

Here, nevertheless, might still remain a question as to why such an activity brings conflicts and sufferings; moreover, why does one realise a differentiation independent from unification. Actually, unless we become free from and transcend such questions and answers, we are still willing for a ground. The denial of the activity of willing for a ground means the realisation of the activity that is originally and truly ground-less.

Although referring to the notion of *nothing (-ness)* as God, which is evolved under the strong influence of East Asian traditions, Nishida is nevertheless generally aiming at a negation of the existence of a ground behind and separated from our actual life.³⁹ Nishida's thinking is based not only on some traditional or philosophical thoughts in the East (and some in the West), but also on his own critical philosophy, which re-

³⁹ For a consideration of the development of Nishida's thinking on "nothing (ness)," see Itabashi 2008.

jects any independent existence or essence from our experience without any presupposition.

Regarding our true individual, unique life in the midst of conflicts and sufferings as "happiness" and "peace," Nishida suggests the realisation of being free from conflicts and suffering even in the midst of them, which comes into being through the radical, co-creative, co-resonant unity of *being present together without ground*; there is no will escaping from sufferings but only the act of living and embracing them. In short, it is just the negation of the will for ground that realises this "peace" among us; it implies an act of living vividly and actively with others in the actual world, even one that is filled with conflicts and suffering.

While aiming at some common ideal or purpose as a reason, basis, and ground for the attainment of peace, which brings about a settlement of conflicts between each other, one is actually escaping from the sufferings in order to secure oneself as a firm ground; nevertheless, sufferings are never abolished because one's experience – or one's life itself – cannot be included in some (for instance, teleological) order *grounded on* an ideal or a purpose. It is *ground-less*. This *ground-lessness* or *nothingness* of the ground, however, indicates the uniqueness of each life in the co-creative unity that cannot be grounded on the only one doctrine or principle.

When one finds that an act of negating the will for ground itself should still only be a negative state escaped and isolated from our actual life filled with sufferings, one still probes for some existence or state remaining after negating any ground. There *one finds that one is still attached to the willing for ground behind one's life in order to secure oneself as ground*. Negating any ground throughout is thus immediately equal to – and absolutely at one with – an act of living vividly and creatively, not abolishing the conflicts and sufferings among us, but having them not hinder our vivid life. Here is no separation between the act of negating a ground and the act of creating one's active unique life. *No effort* toward a ground becomes *just peace*, without any gap, any effort or any ground.

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