

# “Ordinariness of Spirituality”: An Anthropology of Personal Integration from a Perspective of Japanese Buddhist Philosophy

Kiyoshi Kawahara

## Abstract

Generative anthropology posits a private scene tied to language and signification. Since both Eric Gans and Ian Dennis have begun a conversation with Buddhism and the problematic nature of desire, I would like to engage that conversation in this presentation through a model of the self, derived from Japanese philosophy, specifically, “linguistic ālaya-vijñāna” in the philosophy of Toshihiko Izutsu, and “logic of place,” “philosophy of the individual,” and “self-identity of absolute contradiction” in the philosophy of Kitaro Nishida.

I argue that each person embodies a spirit and that “spirituality” emerges at every moment in our daily lives. This is what I call the “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis. I verified this hypothesis by analyzing every comment about a book dealing with terminal illness from book reading sessions. My assertion is that we realize that we always reconstitute and renew what could be called our authentic self at every moment of daily communication, sometimes with instantaneous awakening. This process includes detachment from our desires, from a competitive mode of our mindset, and from a dichotomic way of thinking such as winner vs. loser, assailant vs. victim, and center vs. periphery. In the terms of generative anthropology, this corresponds to overcoming resentment. Instead of competition, struggle and exclusion, we can mutually recognize ourselves as diverse beings each with something unique to contribute and advance toward integration instead of polarization.

**Keywords:** “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis, non-duality, Japanese Way of spirituality, linguistic ālaya-vijñāna, logic of place, philosophy of the individual, self-identity of absolute contradiction

\* \* \*

## Introduction

Generative anthropology posits a collective and private scene tied to language and signification. Since both Eric Gans and Ian Dennis have begun a conversation with Buddhism and the problematic nature of desire as seen on the website of *Anthropoetics* (Gans, 2016a, 2016b; Dennis, 2016), I would like to engage that conversation in this presentation through a model of the self, derived from Japanese philosophy, specifically, “linguistic ālaya-vijñāna” in the philosophy of Toshihiko Izutsu, and “logic of place,” “philosophy of the individual,” and “self-identity of absolute contradiction” in the philosophy of Kitaro Nishida, both of whom are representative Japanese philosophers. I then examine the linguistic data of book reading sessions for a book on a cancer fight in order to verify the “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis.

## **Spirituality**

First of all, I argue that each person embodies a spirit and that “spirituality” emerges at every moment in our daily lives. This is what I call the “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis. Here is WHO’s definition of “spiritual.”

“Spiritual” refers to those aspects of human life relating to experiences that transcend sensory phenomena. This is not the same as “religious,” though for many people the spiritual dimension of their lives includes a religious component. The spiritual aspect of human life may be viewed as an integrating component, holding together the physical, psychological and social components. It is often perceived as being concerned with meaning and purpose and, for those nearing the end of life, this is commonly associated with a need for forgiveness, reconciliation, and affirmation of worth. (WHO, 1990, pp. 50-51)

This statement or definition means that any human being is a spiritual existence (Kubotera, 2021, p. 67), and it entails the “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis, since every time we do something or say something as a spiritual existence, our actions or utterances necessarily reflect our spirituality, in other words, our spirituality comes to arise as our specific visible or audible actions or utterances. And here is a very common and general definition of “spirituality” by a scholar:

Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity through which persons seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature, and the significant or sacred. Spirituality is expressed through beliefs, values, traditions, and practices. (Puchalski et al., 2014)

This definition was initially created in palliative care scenes, and it actually works well for spiritual care workers and care practitioners in the hospitals and other medical facilities. It is often said that when we face a crisis such as a terminal illness, a devastating disaster, a serious accident, unbearable difficulty or irrational misfortune, we become painfully aware of our spirituality. And Puchalski’s definition supposes such cases. However, as I mentioned

above, our ordinary life is full of spirituality whether we are aware of it or not. Hence, I have tried to verify this “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis, using some everyday linguistic data. But before doing that, as a Buddhist monk, I will redefine “spirituality” from the perspective of Japanese philosophy which is deeply embedded in Buddhist concepts.

## **Suzuki Daisetsu**

Suzuki Daisetsu, a well-known Zen monk who popularized Zen throughout the world, defined “Japanese spirituality” as ‘non-duality’ (Suzuki, 1972). ‘What is needed is something that somehow sees that the two are really not two, but one, and that the one is, as it is, two.’ Kashino and Becker argue that based on this fundamental characteristic of non-duality, we can note five characteristics of Japanese spirituality (Kashio & Becker, 2021, pp. 5-6):

- The first is ‘achieving spirituality through praxis.’ Spirituality cannot be reduced to a form or object, but it can be triggered by body-mediated practice.
- The second is ‘qi’ (invisible/impersonal spiritual energy). Eastern philosophy and religion traditionally understand human existence with a third term, like ‘breath,’ or ‘invisible impersonal energy,’ to the dichotomy of mind and body.
- The third is ‘interdependence/interconnectedness.’ Spirituality is often described in psychology and other disciplines as an awareness or sense of individual existence. However, spirituality is fostered in the relation of the non-dual unity of self and other, underlying any superficial dualistic relationship between self and other.
- The fourth is ‘social monism.’ The holistic understanding of spirituality as interdependence/ interconnectedness is related to the unique Japanese understanding of order. [...] Western spirituality was explained in terms of the transcendental dimension—the relationship between the sacred and human beings. In Japan, however, there is no Western sense of sacred and profane space. Rather, the Japanese understand secular society as a unified ‘sacred canopy.’ [...] Japanese people do not oppose the secular to the sacred; spirituality is the supreme order that unifies society.
- The fifth characteristic of spirituality is a ‘Way of being, doing and living.’ [...] In Japan, the Way is ingrained in everyday life, in forms like martial and artistic practices (*budo* and *geido*) and the daily behaviors in which they are traditionally expressed. [...] This is an advantage of Japanese spirituality, a pioneering example of Integral Life Practice that has been around for a thousand years. The Japanese understanding of the Way emphasizes virtue, the power that underlies and drives our lives in everyday practice. Virtue is connected to the invisible energy, such as qi, that activates both the mind and the body.

Based on these characteristics of the Japanese Way of spirituality, it can be summarized as an ontological and methodological holism, in contrast to the psychological and

methodological individualism of the West. In addition, the very nature of “spirituality” is not one of a surface phenomenon, but one that exists on a much deeper, subconscious level. In this way, theorizing “spirituality” on the basis of Japanese Buddhist philosophy can offer a different perspective from conventional Western studies, with a hope of proposing a more global understanding of spirituality. Therefore, I will introduce the two representative Japanese philosophers, Izutsu Toshihiko and Kitaro Nishida.

### **Izutsu Toshihiko**

In Esoteric and Tantric Buddhism, symbolic images are valuable, even though they appear to be absurd or insignificant to our common sense mind, because they represent deeper worldviews unattainable in our ordinary state of consciousness (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 23). According to Izutsu (1981):

. . . the symbolic images . . . are extremely valuable in that the figures of the things looming up through the mist of these images do represent the primeval configurations of a reality which are psychically far more real and more relevant to the fate and existence of man than the sensory reality established at the surface level of consciousness. The world-vision presented by the images . . . is, in other words, a direct reflection of reality as it is viewed at a deeper level of consciousness, and as such it reveals the primeval structure of Being which remains hidden from the view of the empirical eyes. . . . (p. 443)

The phenomenon of Ālaya-vijñāna is explained by William S. Waldron in <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0003.xml?rskey=MSctcw&result=1&q=alaya-vijnana#firstMatch> :

Here, ālaya-vijñāna (storehouse consciousness) refers to a level of subliminal mental processes that occur uninterruptedly throughout one’s life and, in the Buddhist view, one’s multiple lifetimes. It represents, in effect, one’s personal continuity along with the continuity of one’s accumulated karmic potential (hence, “storehouse”). [...] Initially, ālaya-vijñāna addressed a series of problems created by the Abhidharmic emphasis on the momentary nature of all mental processes, mostly concerning personal continuity: the continuity of karmic potential and the afflictions (kleśa) in a latent state, the gradual path to liberation, and the problem of rebirth. Once articulated, this underlying level of subliminal consciousness also allowed for a more robust explanation of the constructed nature of perception (“consciousness-,” “representation-,” or “appearance-only,” vijñapti-mātra) as well as the commonality of our experienced world (bhājana-loka). And since it represents the “store” of one’s past karma, ālaya-vijñāna is what must be eliminated, transformed, or purified on the path to liberation, when it becomes a “stainless consciousness” (amala-vijñāna).

Izutsu regards “the house of the symbolic images” as *mundus imaginalis* (or the Imaginary

and the Imaginal) and also posits the fundamental place that generates the images at the bottom of *mundus imaginalis*. Izutsu (1985; 1991) calls it the “linguistic ālaya-vijñāna,” or the “linguistic Storehouse Consciousness,” relying on the idea of ālaya-vijñāna developed in the Yogacara School of Mahayana Buddhism. The “linguistic Storehouse Consciousness” here in question is an underlying matrix where all images (including the sensory images as well as the symbolic images) are conceived and, to use a Yogacara terminology, stored as *Bīja*, or “psychic seeds,” which tend to transform themselves into actual images (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 23).

Various schools of Buddhist thought held that karmic effects arose out of seeds that were latent in an individual’s mindstream or psycho-physical continuum (Fukuda, 2003). This means that the true nature of “spirituality” can be thought as exactly what has been accumulated in this “ālaya-vijñāna” or Storehouse Consciousness.

When I perform an action motivated by greed, it plants a ‘seed’ in the series of dharmas [phenomena] that is my mind. Such a seed is not a thing in itself—a dharma but merely the modification or ‘perfuming’ of the subsequent flow of dharmas consequent upon the action. In the course of time this modification matures and issues in a particular result, in the same way as a seed does not produce its fruit immediately, but only after the ‘modifications’ of the shoot, stem, leaf, and flower. (Rupert, 1998, p. 222)

In the introduction of this presentation, I proposed “ordinariness of spirituality” hypothesis with which I argue that each person embodies a spirit and that “spirituality” is present at every moment of our daily lives. This statement can be endorsed by the mechanism of “ālaya-vijñāna” (Storehouse Consciousness) and *Bīja* (psychic seeds). Every time we do something or say something as a spiritual existence, our actions or utterances necessarily reflect our spirituality, and vice versa, our actions or utterances necessarily infuse our spirituality as our karma at a very deep level of consciousness.

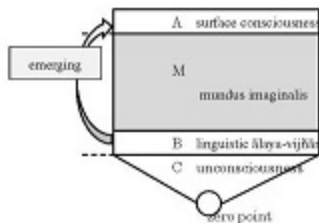
## **Kitaro Nishida**

Here, a question arises. Does spirituality exclusively belong to an individual or does it arise among individuals intersubjectively? In order to answer this question, I will introduce Kitaro Nishida’s “logic of place” theory. But first, I will examine his most famous book.

*An Inquiry into the Good* by Nishida begins with his rejection of dualism in order to return to primordial experience and from there explain all phenomena. Moving neither toward the world itself nor toward the world that exists behind experience, Nishida’s philosophy includes an inquiry into the origins of our experiences and their structure. In this sense, it may be called a kind of “radical empiricism” (Huang, 2007). Pure experience, as primordial,

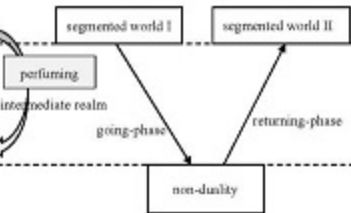
figure: "structural model of consciousness and existence" and "three-stage model"

< structural model >



(Izutsu, 1991, p. 214)

< three-stage model >



(Izutsu, 1991, p. 136,

up and down are reversed)

is a consciousness prior to the subject-object dichotomy; it is the pure, present world itself nor toward the world that exists behind experience, Nishida's philosophy includes an inquiry into the origins of our experiences and their structure. In this sense, it may be called a kind of "radical empiricism" (Huang, 2007). Pure experience, as primordial, is a consciousness prior to the subject-object dichotomy; it is the pure, present consciousness. This consciousness is the origin of all realities but is itself without meaning, an immediate direct experience that cannot be grasped in object-oriented language (Huang, 2009, pp. 136).

This "pure experience" is actually the world of what Izutsu describes as "ālaya-vijñāna" (Storehouse Consciousness), in which no language divides the world into parts, and no division, no differentiation or distinction occurs. It is the inner domain of our subconsciousness without any word or language making sense of the world. This is what Daisetsu Suzuki called "non-duality." Therefore, it is in principle impossible to define spirituality with words, since no language functions in this domain.

As for the concept "place," Nishida notes that "being must exist somewhere; otherwise there is no difference between being and nothingness." The earlier place of specific "being" is located in a more inclusive place. "Absolute nothingness" is the most inclusive and final place that is able to include everything without itself being included in any more encompassing place. Place is therefore nothingness in respect to that which is located within. Ultimate reality must therefore be the final place. The problem that remains is to show absolute nothingness to be a true nothingness and not a relative nothingness that positions non-being in relation to being (Huang, 2009, pp. 138-139).

Absolute inclusiveness is the key concept of "place," so that every time we have communication, we utter a word, express ourselves, and take some action as a surface phenomenon arising from our spirituality, or "ālaya-vijñāna," and this occurs among people in a specific "place" which is shared among them intersubjectively. Spirituality comes into view among people in a specific place. In other words, at the beginning, there is absolute nothingness, and there people meet and have communication. And the fact that people are being there permits spirituality to surface there.

In conclusion so far, based on Japanese philosophy, every time we do something, say something or have communication with others as a spiritual existence, our spirituality is manifested as our specific actions or utterances. This is the "ordinariness of spirituality" hypothesis, and since each individual has his/her own life experience infuse their spirituality as their karma at a very deep level of consciousness, what emerges as their action or utterances differ from person to person. This is related to Nishida's ideas of "philosophy of the individual" and "self-identity of absolute contradiction," but this subject cannot be dealt with here.

Here, the conclusion for how we can conceive of "spirituality" is as follows:

- a) the core of spirituality: tathātā (“thusness” or “suchness”; the true, concrete essence or nature of things before ideas or words); absolute non-segmentation and the most fundamental sphere in a person’s subconscious
- b) ) the phenomena of spirituality: the attitude or appearance of the segmented aspect of a person; that is, the domain where we interact with others and use language in our everyday life
- c) the functions of spirituality: the self-awakening process through detachment from compulsive desires, resentment and competition

I have not yet examined point c), so next I will verify this hypothesis and analyze how spirituality functions as a self-awakening process.

### **Diversity of sense-making**

I held a total of 15 book reading sessions in three groups with 19 participants in 2021 and analyzed every comment by the participants about a book dealing with terminal illness. Although all participants read exactly the same text from the same book, different participants expressed different comments or opinions about the same lines of the book. This phenomenon can be called “diversity of sense-making.” People read a book and interpret the same passage each in their own way that is different from others. That is, interpretation or sense-making of the text totally depends on how the input information of the text and the information stored in their long-term memory interact, and as different people have different long-term memory, the interpretation or sense-making of the same passage differs from person to person, and is totally open to indeterminacy of linguistic meaning. This indeterminacy includes 1) polysemy (sense-making differs in different situations; dynamism of the place), 2) diversity (in a narrow sense; sense-making differs among different people; dynamism of people), 3) time alteration (sense-making alters with the lapse of time; dynamism of time), and 4) unknowability (impossibility to ultimately know the sense of utterances; dynamism of the subconscious).

I will now discuss 2) and 3) and show how the participants express their own self in their unique ways, and find and awaken a new self through the dialogues with other participants.

Firstly, I will explain about the book. The title is *I suddenly become ill*, which deals with a terminal illness, or a cancer, and it is a collection of 20 correspondences between a female philosopher who suddenly became ill (she is now deceased) and a female medical anthropologist. They talk about how a terminally ill patient struggles during the remainder of her life, contemplating how she faces her death, how she concludes her life, and how she recreates interpersonal relationships between her family and friends.

As for 2) diversity, or dynamism of people, by getting triggered by a phrase “by chance” or “accidentally” as opposed to “necessarily” or “inevitably”—for example, she says she became terminally ill by chance—the participants of the book reading sessions expressed



their experiences in life. One participant talked about her experience of being hit by Great East Japan Earthquake and seriously injured. Another talked about her experience of harassment in the workplace, reasoning that the happening was not by chance, but necessarily caused by her fate. Another talked about how she assisted people suffering from the major eruption of a volcano in Miyake Island and Great East Japan Earthquake. Another talked about a terminally ill patient to whom she offered spiritual care in a hospital. The patient said she became ill totally by accident, but tried to accept such an accident as necessity. Actually the literal meaning of "by accident" in a dictionary is the same and we all share the literal meaning, but each constructs his/her own sense of a word or a phrase every time we have communication with others. This is called linguistic constructionism and the construction of a meaning or sense-making fundamentally derives from our spirituality that arises every time we have communication. And this spirituality contributes to integration and peace. Back to Puchalski's definition of spirituality, this dynamic nature of everyday communication reflects our inner struggle through which we seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature, and the sacred. Spirituality is expressed through such everyday conversation as seen in the book reading sessions.

As for 3) dynamism of time, with the lapse of time, or as he/she participates in the book reading sessions, the same participant inevitably alters his/her interpretation of the book, and modifies the semantic universe of the book and its authors in relation to all the reactions and opinions that the other participants express. And he/she alters his/her own values, life views, world views, and meaning of life and so on by finding and awakening a new self, triggered by other participants' opinions, beliefs and values. The mechanism of this process is that a participant hears other participants' opinions about the book, meaning of life, sense of values and world views, and he/she interprets them as he/she renews his/her spirituality in the self-awakening process through detachment from compulsive desires, resentment, and competition. For example, one female participant reflected on the first session, saying that I tend to read this book from a perspective of a medical worker, and it reflects my egoism in appearing strong as a professional nurse. When she wrote a reflection on the second session, she said she was able to widen her view by listening to other participants' opinions, and her impression of the author totally changed, which gave her a new perspective for her world view. She also said that she learned a lot through this book reading session by knowing how enthusiastically other participants listen to and try very hard to understand others, which creates a rapport within the group and a sense of security in the reading session. She said that she felt happiness being with other participants and sharing precious opinions with others with feelings of respect and reverence. And she said she herself felt healed by other participants' telling their own life stories. As she reflected on the reading sessions, it seems that she renewed her own self or spirituality by absorbing other participants' utterances that seemed precious for her life.

## **Conclusion**

My assertion is that we realize that we always reconstitute and renew what could be called our authentic self at every moment of daily communication, sometimes with instantaneous awakening. This process includes detachment from our desires, from a competitive mode of our mindset, and from a dichotomic way of thinking such as winner vs. loser, assailant vs. victim, and center vs. periphery. In the terms of generative anthropology this corresponds to overcoming resentment. Instead of competition, struggle, and exclusion, we can mutually recognize ourselves as diverse beings each with something unique to contribute and advance toward integration instead of polarization.

Again about the definition, aspects, and functions of spirituality, these layers of the self might correspond in generative anthropology to the center (a), the periphery (b), and the internal communication between the two (c). As suggested, the last is sometimes attainable even through everyday communication, but in a more disciplined way everyone, not restricted to Buddhist monks, can practice meditation, and through meditation we practice detachment from desires and negative feelings (but I must leave the details of this issue for another article). In this context, I would like to propose the shift from dichotomic mindset which entails confrontation and resentment, which is the ultimate source of polarization in society, to an absolute zero state in a subconscious sphere beyond dichotomic conflicts. And the concept of spirituality is a key to this process of mutual care communication.

### References

Dennis, I. (2016). More skilled practitioners of wanting”: Buddhism and romanticism in the market world. *Anthropoetics*. XXII, no. 1 Fall.

(<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2201/2201dennis/>)

Fukuda, T. (2003). Bhadanta Rama: A Sautrantika before Vasubandhu. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*. 26 (2).

Gans, E. (2016a). Nagarjuna and Zeno: Paradox East and West I. *Chronicles of love & resentment*. (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw515/>)

Gans, E. (2016b). Nagarjuna and Zeno: Paradox East and West II. *Chronicles of love & resentment*. (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw516/>)

Huang, W. (2007). Nishida Kitarō and Xiong Shi-Li. *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*. New Series XXXVII, No. 2, pp. 403-430.

Huang, W. (2009). The shift in Nishida's logic of place. In Wing-keung, L. & Ching-yuen, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 4: Facing the 21st Century*. Nanzan Institute for Religious & Culture. pp. 135-151.

Izutsu, T. (1981). Between image and no-image: Far Eastern ways of thinking. In Portmann, A. & Ritsema, R. (Eds.). *Eranos 1979 yearbook*. vol. 48: *Thought and mythic images*. (pp.

427-461). Insel Verlag.

Izutsu, T. (1985). *To the depths of meaning: The water levels of Eastern philosophy*. Iwanami Shoten.

Izutsu, T. (1991). *Consciousness and essence: In search of the spiritual East*. Iwanami Shoten.

Kashio, N. & Becker, C. (2021). (Eds.). *Spirituality as a way*. Kyoto University Press.

Kubotera, T. (2021). *Spiritual care and church*. Inochinokotobasha.

Miyano, M. & Isono, M. (2019). *Suddenly feeling sick*, Shobunsha.

Nakagawa, Y. (2000). *Eastern philosophy and holistic education*. A thesis submitted to Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

Oxford Bibliographies (<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/>)

Puchalski, C. M., Vitillo, R., Hull, S. K., & Reller, N. (2014). Improving the spiritual dimension of whole person care: Reaching national and international consensus. *Journal of palliative medicine*. 17(6). pp. 642-656.

Rupert, G. (1998). *The foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.

Suzuki, D. (1972). *Japanese spirituality (Nihon teki reisei)* (N. Waddell, trans.). Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science.

*WHO Technical Report Series. 804*. (1990). pp. 50-51.