

Nishida Kitaro's Expressive Activity in *Katana* Sword Making as a Way to Achieve Pure Experience¹

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Abstract

Western craft and craftsmanship have long been taken as complementary or even supplementary – in contrast with high art and artistic explorations. This pejorative approach is quite common from western industrial perspective. An artisan's work is then taken less seriously than an artist's *oeuvre d'art*. Contrary to this, Asian countries have long recognised the mastery of these master craftsmen and gave no different treatment to artists and artisans. This paper examines the concept of *expressive activity* from Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro in his essay "Expressive Activity" written in 1925. In this Nishida proposes that the fulfilment of a state of mind that he called *pure experience* can only be achieved through an action that is independent from external urges. The author then pursued this line of thought by taking Nishida's idea to see how this kind of *acting* – as Nishida addresses it – is present in the ancient craft of *katana* (Japanese Sword) making performed by veteran swordsmiths. By analysing Nishida's texts including *An Inquiry into the Good* and *Ontology of Production*, the author explains that the old wisdom of "giving life to the steel" can be justified by taking Nishida's pure experience as the *telos* of an artisan's expressive activity.

Keywords: Nishida Kitaro, swords, katana, ronin, Zen Buddhism.

Introduction

It is not uncommon to see how Japan in the feudal era relied heavily on swords. Cinematic *anime* (animated films) and *manga* (Japanese style comic books) have constantly referred to this historical trace glorifying *ronin* (wandering warriors) like Miyamoto Musashi along with their outstanding – if not superhuman – feat, swinging swords in numerous romanticized duels and ambushes. The story of the curved blade – *tachi* – has been central in countless tales of

battles and war – like the unification of Japan under the flag of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the short-lived dynasty's tragic ending in Sekigahara, 15 September 1600 CE. Japanese culture has also been synonymous with the word "samurai" – a word whose origin dating back to the 7th century CE.

A sword entitled *Ame no murakomo no tsurugi* ("the Cloud Cluster Sword) belongs to a late emperor (*tenno*) Jimmu is a sacred treasure of the Japanese royal family. According to the longstanding creational myth *Kojiki*, the sword was even said as the gift from the goddess Amaterasu Omikami to the absolute ruler of Yamato – the former name of Japan. The western way of addressing the sword as "samurai sword", however, is slightly misleading. A country with warrior-class absolute *bakufu* rulers from around 12th century to 19th century CE certainly has developed a complex understanding of their warfare, of which the blade is no exception.

Scholars like Stephen Turnbull and Mitsuo Kure argues that the phrase "samurai sword" is "too little too late". It is rather an overarching term to simplify the vast spectrum of the Japanese warrior caste and their weapons of honours. "Too late" means that this social stratum in the Japanese society in the feudal era has developed further than just this word – *samurai* – suggests: "the ones who serves" (Turnbull, 2008:13). The embryonic stage of this unique way of using warfare as means of ruling can be dated back to the 7th century CE, when Japan solidified its military despots in the form of emperors (Turnbull, 2008:10-13). These people were known from those days onward as *bushi* – or men of arms (Kure, 2001:7), and at that time it was ranging as a commanding line from *kucho*, *taisei*, *ryosai*, *koi*, *shoki*, to *daiki* (Kure, 2001:8). Subsequent development of *bushi* made the term *samurai* completely misleading – as having the word "soldier" to refer to everyone in the military and ignores their rank.

"Too little" applies to the sword. At first the Japanese began with two types of swords – *tachi* and *tsurugi*. Where *tachi* is one-sided curved blade, *tsurugi* is the exact opposite. It has two sharp edges, straight (*chokuto*) and is certainly influenced by the Chinese

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(Kure, 2001:86; Yumoto, 2008[1958]:29). The latter was then phased-out, and *tachi* in turn was evolved to be a sophisticated set of blades, mostly based on its length. Scholars like Oscar Ratti and Adele Westbrook noted at least there are five classes of sword that belongs to a bushi: *daito*, *katana*, *wakizashi*, *tanto* and *aikuchi*. Together with *wakizashi*, *katana* forms a kind of bushi regalia called *daisho* (Ratti and Westbrook, 1973: 223-4). *Daisho* has always been in pair, and it is inappropriately addressed as the “samurai sword”. This ignorance is natural, though, as guns in the West have developed into numerous kinds of ammunition-based projectile weaponry, and the only word known to public is just “gun”.

If *daisho* plays a strong role in the feudal social order in military-ruled Japan, it is probable to assume that those who forge it do not do this for the urge of mere financial reward, since the smiths are more of artists than makers. A sword expert John M. Yumoto noted that there were five schools of sword making in Japan- Bizen, Yamashiro, Yamato, Soshu, and Mino - each with their own style and closely-guarded secret recipes and methods (Yumoto, 2008[1958]:31). If it is just a mere “sword factory” - then these schools will be completely irrelevant.

Research Question and Method

This paper is aimed to answer a question: “What does it mean to make a sword in the Japanese society?” The author uses this to elaborate on two possible answers. First, sword has no significant meaning and role for the Japanese despite their centuries long history of military rule. Second, sword plays a paramount role in the Japanese culture in that philosophical analysis can be employed to reveal the ethos underlying modern Japan.

Certainly, the author will dismiss the former and claim the latter. The author will argue that *katana* - the most representative kind of Japanese sword - is not just a mere instrument. Taking this as the point of argumentative departure, the author will treat the second answer using philosophical standpoints from Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro with his expressive activities - whose reasoning on pure experience is heavily influenced by American philosopher William James.

The analysis will be conducted by comparing James’s idea of pure experience in his seminal essay “A World of Pure Experience” from 1904 and Nishida’s expressive activity mainly in his works in *The Ontology of Production* and *An Inquiry into the Good*, written in 1925. From this comparison the author will then draw a line to articulate the main reason behind swordsmiths’ motivation to forge

and further treat the swords as “artworks” - and not for a mere product from just an ordinary factory.

Giving Life to the Steel

A surviving master swordsmith in the modern era, Kunihira Kawachi - best known for reviving the long forgotten sword-making style called Midare Utsuri, gave his statement about the “life” of a sword. Based in Nara, the former capital of Japan, Kunihira says in a documentary report by NHK - government-owned Japan’s official broadcasting service - that:

“Don’t kill the steel. We give the steel life. Forge the steel, and bring out its best self. [...] The steel, either it comes to life, or it dies.” (NHK World, 2019)

Kunihira is not just toying with words and personifying the blade. He ties *katana* to his own reason of existence:

“[*Katana* is] beautiful because it cuts so well. Because it cuts, you look after it. Because it cuts, you respect it. It has spiritual power. [...] To cut is a sword’s reason to exist. That must never be forgotten. My job is to make a blade that cuts. It is beautiful because it cuts. It is the beauty of utility. If a blade did not to cut, our job would not exist.” (NHK World, 2019)

To Kunihira, he is the enabler of the blade’s potential to cut. In his statement Kunihira implied that the reason of existence of the sword is deeply entangled with that of the smith. Another smith, a master knife-sharpener, named Sakashita Katsumi values his lifework path with this statement:

“What makes a good knife is not the price or the maker, it is how it is sharpened. A knife is not about cutting things in half. The best knives bring joy to the food being sliced. They cut effortlessly.” (NHK World, 2020)

Sakashita is not just doing it for his savings, rather he is doing for him and the knives he sharpened:

“There are no signs or paved roads in the path I am following. I do not know if I am going uphill or downhill. This job was full of hardships[,] but I never once thought of quitting. This is the path I chose.” (NHK World, 2020)

Again, Sakashita takes his chosen profession to profess his loyalty to the knives entrusted by the

expert chefs from around Japan. His dedication is directed toward the joy of restaurant guests and customers, and not for the sake of his wealth. Both Sakashita and Kunihira are the living proofs of working as enabling, and not toiling.

Their testaments of this spiritual path of professing have a long history. Even the legend dates back to a mythical swordsmith named Amakuni, who shed his tears over broken swords, only to take up oath and shut himself in his workshop to make the unbreakable sword. Amakuni was not even threatened by the emperor, the legend goes. It was his own willingness to make the best sword that drove him to out-best his own standard (Yumamoto, 2008[1958]:27-8).

Japanese swordsmith is not just a smith. Like Kunihira, the forging rituals begin with the purification of the smith by pouring cold water all over his body. He then offers his prayer to an altar of the deity – located in his forge. He wears his uniform during the whole smithing process. The process is then completed by engraving his name to the new-born blade. Every blade then carries the maker's name – the smith has become one with the *katana* (Yumamoto, 2008[1958]:99-110).

From the user's perspective – *bushi* – a sword has to be morally worthy. "The soul" tempered by legends like Masamune, Yoshimitsu, and Yoshihiro strengthened the moral worth of the blade (Ratti and Westbrook, 1973: 226-7). In other words, the sword has to cope with the spartan self-discipline of its owner. An ancient text, *Hagakure* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo, clearly describes these demands.

"[...] [E]very morning samurai would diligently groom themselves by bathing in the open air, shaving their foreheads (*sakayaki*), putting fragrant oil in their hair, cutting their fingernails and filling them with pumice stone, then polishing them with wood sorrel. Of course, military equipment was kept neat and dusted, and polished to be free of rust. Although paying so much attention to personal appearance may seem grandiose, it is because of the samurai's resolve to die at any time that he makes preparation to meet his death. If slain with unkempt appearance, it shows a lack of forethought regarding his fate, and he will be scorned by his enemy as being unclean. This is why young and old alike should always pay attention to matters of personal grooming." (Yamamoto, 2014:77)

Another scholar, Christopher Hellman, cited that "in the end the sword becomes part of the body". This means that for a *bushi* it is important to become one with the blade, and any attachment to the fear of living should be replaced with the acceptance of the joy of death. Another citation by Hellman: "Those who seek to hold onto life will lose it." Hellman then added:

"In a contest, those who concentrate on death, who do not seek to preserve their lives, will certainly live." (Hellman, 2010:53,33)

A contemporary *kenjutsu* practitioner from the Shinkendo school, Toshishiro Obata, states that:

"The sword of the bushi became more than just a tool of the warrior, or even a symbol. The identity of a bushi was inextricably intertwined with the sword; it was always by his side, and became a part of him." (Toshishiro, 2012:6)

Later, Toshishiro added:

"In its creation, a sword even was formed out of the traditional five elements found in nature – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. As the final step in the forging of the sword, the swordsmith is said to have put his soul into it, imbuing the sword with its own life and identity." (Toshishiro, 2012:6)

Paradoxically though, "the life of the blade" is intended for taking "the life human beings". One of the examples of testing a sword (*shito*) is through human corpse cutting in the early centuries of the samurai's era. The only way to test a sword is through cutting something (Toshishiro, 2005:37,41). The purpose of a living *katana* – with the embodiment of the maker (the smith) and the user (the warrior) – is bring death as efficient and effective as possible.

Katana Smithing as Pure Experience

Both smiths – Kunihira and Sakashita – represent two opposite ends of the existence of a blade. On one hand, the *katana* maker Kunihira emphasizes the importance of cutting – whatever the *katana* cuts – as the primary reason of his life enterprise. On the other, Sakashita embraces the joy of culinary experience as the foundation of his decision to pursue a lifelong career as a knife-sharpener. For the former, Kunihira is oblivious of the action taken by the wielder of the sword. The latter, on the contrary, only takes chefs as his client as he wants to assure that his works resonate in the palates of the chefs' clients and customers.

Whatever the premise is, the author has demonstrated that it is not possible to claim that the act of forging a katana blade in the Japanese culture is a mere act of an artisan in the western sense of meaning. Had it been for the sole purpose of profits, these masters would cease to exist when Japan embraced modernization. Their numbers – these swordsmiths and master sword makers – are thinning, but the method used is more of an artist than an artisan. In fact, the word ‘artisan’ barely accommodates the grasp of the context. Therefore, the author proposes Nishida’s idea to fill this contextual gap.

According to Nishida’s scholar Michiko Yusa, Nishida’s life in the most turbulent times in Japanese history has taught him to embrace philosophical pragmatism as a way to cope with his losses and console his pain during the war period. Even his death on June 7 1945 was marked by the defeat of the Japanese forces and rationed food supplies. One of his biggest lost is the death of Nishida’s daughter, Yuko, on January 11 1907. The brutal and never-ending war had taken the lives of everyone closed to Nishida – even the philosopher himself. (Yusa, 2002).

Preferring to not to blame any sides in the most horrific human tragedy in the modern times, Nishida began to incorporate Zen Buddhism into his philosophy (Yusa, 2002:77). The author argues that this approach by the Japanese philosopher is not a mere coincidence. During the military rules by the *daimyo*, Zen was one of the beliefs that survived the hundreds of years of war and clannish disputes. Other Buddhist sects and even Christianity perished. The Zen’s conception of balance rather than sins greatly convinced the military lords and commanders that this religion was not a threat to their authorities.

The recurrent themes in Nishida’s thought are that human consciousness – in the cognitive, volitional, or aesthetic aspects – works through oppositions. The act of knowing for Nishida, according to Yusa’s interpretation – necessitates our abandonment of the self. Objective knowing is only possible when our subjective agency is abandoned. Human beings themselves are driven by this opposing forces. The existence of human bodies prerequisites his ideals, which in turn requires the body to sacrifices itself to sustain the ideas. We work, in Yusa’s line of argument concerning Nishida’s thought, as our effort to reach the ideals and abandon our physical urges. These ideals can be distorted, and our effort of purification is then necessary. Self-egoism can easily replace our struggle to reach our humanity – individualism. Our pure effort after discarding our

egoism is the pure experience itself (Yusa, 2002:77-84).

Taking Nishida’s position through the lens of Yusa, for every glass we drink the cup must be emptied. For every purchase we make our wallet will be emptied. For every heart we won our schedule must be emptied. For every blade Kunihira strives, the painstaking effort assures the smith to become less of himself and more of the blade. The ultimate act of selflessness is when Kunihira is no longer there – only the hammer, the anvil, and every tool he needs to give birth to the blade present. The same thing applies to Sakashita. Only when Sakashita is absent and the food enthusiasts are present, the knives can be completely sharpened.

The absence of the self mainly breaks the boundary of the cognitive and volitional. The act of drinking requires the knowledge of drinking (how I put the tip of the cup on my lips) and the desire to drink. When we drink, this division is no longer necessary. In my act of drinking I do not need to separate the two. In English, I am drinking is when I experience the drink going through my mouth and to my throat. This *going-on* experience, according to Yusa, is what Nishida takes as pure experience (Yusa, 2002:96-7).

Nishida’s proposal concerning the significance of pure experience cannot be taken apart from the work of William James. According to James, our experience is incomplete because what we experience is our knowledge. The completion is only possible when what humans experience is their perception (James, 1904). In his article James differs two experience: telling about a library hall or going to the library hall. The same thing can be said between taking a tour group for a vacation and listen to what a tour guide says, and experiencing the place itself without any explanation about the venue. When our experience is told, the purity of the experience is tainted.

Master swordsmiths in Japan tell their apprentice nothing. The apprentice is doing the work, and not being told to do the work. From James standpoint, this is only possible when the master is giving their pure experience. The apprenticeship in Japanese way is always conducted in silence – the only teacher is the sword being made itself. The teacher has nothing to teach – because he is not present. When the teacher is absent, the sword reveal itself to the student. The teacher is in the hammer, anvil, and the forge. In this the task of the teacher is to negate his presence and become one with the hammer, the fire, and the ore. Only there can he meet the teacher and learn his techniques.

James' scholar David C. Lamberth clarifies James' definition of pure experience as "immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories" (Lamberth, 1999:28). In this, James dilutes the borders between monistic and pluralistic nature of experience (Lamberth, 1999:25). This dilution is what Nishida addresses as the unity of consciousness. In the unity of consciousness, according to Nishida, the good is the happiness itself, not the pleasure. This unity is the act of the will, and pure experience – Nishida says – anchoring his claim from Aristotelian standpoints (Nishida, 1990 [1921,1987]:123-4). By taking this disposition, Nishida is closing the gap left by Immanuel Kant when the practical reason and aesthetic judgment left unresolved.

From this perspective, the act of smithing conducted by masters like Kunihira is actually irrelevant with the usage of the *katana* in battle. What the smith does is taking his presence to the steel – thus "the life of the steel". His inability to negate his presence will "kill the steel". Kunihira is acting on behalf of the will, his will, in that only his unity of consciousness. His action is for his own good, not for his pleasure. This renders the paradox less meaningful: Kunihira does breathe life into the steel. The telos of the blade is to cut – and cutting for the sake of defending humanity is certainly closer to will of the swordsmith than chopping heads for the purpose of mere pleasure.

Expressive Activity as Pure Experience

A mere act is not, according to Nishida, an expressive activity. Nishida says in "*Hyogen Sayo*" that an expressive activity is: "activity that appears in the profound depths of self-awareness that negates even self-awareness itself; herein, time loses the form of time itself and enters into an aspect of eternity" (Nishida, 2012 [1925]:52). This statement consists of two elements: first, the action consists of a negation toward the action; and second, the action must negate time. To understand Nishida's suggestion, we need to consider how an action is conducted.

For Nishida, the main problem with non-expressive activities is its measure against its own goal – or gain. If a runner is on a race, then her or his action of running is based on: her or his ability to reach the finish line, and the shortest time possible to reach the assigned distance. The distance is used as the yardstick of her or his achievement. Here her or his action is a measured action. When the action is measured, then the actor of the action is told. This restrains the actor of the action from experiencing pure experience. By being told, an actor cannot

perceived using his or her perception. His mind is full of concepts – and the percept is interrupted.

The first negation is toward the action itself; in the analogy the runner must negate the finish line. His or her action of running must be based on the internal urge from him or her to run – because he or she can or has the ability to run. The second negation is time: where his or her usefulness is measured against temporal standards. Time is the consequence of direct external urges. This is the time he or she has to negate. Nature does not have assigned time. The elements have their own time, and for them, our time is not time. Evolution has time, and no corners can be cut. Wine cannot be forced to reach maturity for the sake of bottling, as coffee beans ask for seven complete years before they can offer us their shared happiness. Steel and charcoal have their own time, and not the assigned time we push for the sake of production scale. The runner negates the assigned time by running according to what his or her body needs.

To achieve pure experience, a smith cannot forge a *katana* because he is told to do so. A smith forges because of the *katana* is there, waiting in the form of an ore. A smith forges because he is a smith, and not because he has to smith. Sakashita, although he is not forging a blade, works in the same manner. He does not recognize time in his work. The knives are ready to be sharpened, and he sharpens because he is a sharpener. It is the knife's presence that requires Sakashita's absence. The knife is sharpened when the time is ready. Like Kunihira, each part of the edge has its own time – a time that does not belong to the master sharpener. The time belongs to the knife itself. That means, a blade can only be tempered by the blade itself according the time the blade requires. At this point, the blade provides pure experience to the master swordsmith, in that the boundary of concept and percept does no longer exist.

Conclusion

Making a *katana* in the Japanese line of sword-making is not just fabricating one, for a reason: the action of the smith himself is an expressive activity. This activity is different because of two reasons: it negates the action of the actors and it negates time. These then provide the sufficient condition for the action of *katana* making as pure experience – or the most genuine form of experience according to William James. The absence of the smith is the prerequisite for the presence of the blade. Smithing a *katana* is not then for the purpose of making one, rather, the smith fulfils his individuality that is free from self-egoism.

This provides the author a way to see these artisans in a new way. The practice of sword-making is never simple, and it is not to be taken lightly. In the Japanese society, the expressive activity of sword-making is an important symbol that negates the external urges found in modern way of living. Living a life in its purest experience is an offer that has always been around for centuries, if not millennium. It embodies the concept of selflessness - in the most vivid example standing the test of time.

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