

A PHILOSOPHER'S DEFEAT IN WORLD WAR II: TANABE HAJIME'S CONVERSION TO SHIN BUDDHISM IN PHILOSOPHY AS METANOETICS

Taro Mochizuki

Osaka University, Japan

Abstract

In the last years of World War II, Tanabe Hajime, started writing *Philosophy as Metanoetics (the way of zange)*. He was inspired by Shinran, a thirteenth-century Japanese Shin Buddhist thinker and began to understand philosophy as *metanoetics*. “a philosophy that is not a philosophy”. Philosophy that is not a philosophy cannot be undertaken by one’s own power, but must be acquired through Other-power. Hence, philosophizing implies the continual act of “practice-faith-witness” (*gyo-shin-sho*) of the philosopher’s own *metanoia*, performed by Other-power within himself. This paper argues that Tanabe’s conversion became a creative deconstruction of modern philosophy caused by the cultural encounter occasioned by the war, which generated a dialectical effect in his thinking and eventually led to his conversion to Shin Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

In the last years of World War II, the thinking of Japanese intellectuals and the general public was severely repressed by techniques of thought control, despite the fact that the defeat of the Japanese military was already evident in the eyes of the nation. During this time, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962)-one of the founding members of the group of philosophers that has become known worldwide as the Kyoto School, alongside Nishida Kitaro (1885-1945) and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990)-started writing *Philosophy as Metanoetics (the way of zange)*, which was finally

published after the defeat in 1946.

To understand the general atmosphere of the defeated country during the period of Allied occupation (1945-1947), let us refer to a statement by the former Prime Minister Higashikuni. John W. Dower translates Higashikuni's words in Chapter 16 of his monumental work *Embracing Defeat* as follows: "The military, civilian officials, and the people as a whole must thoroughly self-reflect and repent. I believe that the collective repentance of the hundred million (*ichioku sozange*) is the first step in the resurrection of our country, the first step in bringing unity to our country".¹

As Dower explains, "the concept of 'repentance' was placed at the center of public debate"² back then, and this atmosphere involved both intellectuals and the general public. Dower continues, asserting that Tanabe's work "seemed uncannily in tune with the ambiance of the defeated country", although "Tanabe did not develop these thoughts in reaction to the surrender".³ In fact, Tanabe, having been gnawed with guilt for being an incompetent thinker who could not resist militarism, elaborated his philosophy as the way of *zange* or metanoetics "when he was preparing his valedictory lectures on retiring from the prestigious chair in philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University"⁴ in the last few months of 1944.

Philosophy as Metanoetics marked a milestone in the author's philosophical itinerary, indicating his turn from Western to Eastern philosophy. This conversion was inspired by Shinran, a thirteenth-century Japanese Shin Buddhist thinker. Tanabe interpreted Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho* as *metanoetics*, and denied philosophy as he had understood it before.⁵ For Tanabe, metanoetics, "a philosophy that is not a philosophy",⁶ is the only possible way of philosophizing. Of course, as Dower elaborates, there is a difference "between Tanabe's densely reasoned disquisition on *zange*, or repentance, and the government's bromides on the same issue".⁷ However, based on the fact that Tanabe passionately reworked Shinran's thought, is it correct to conclude—as John Dower critically contends—that the position he reached therein was "intensely nationalistic" and that "he did all this in a way that emphasized the unique, even superior, traditional wisdom of Japan?"⁸ That is the research question of this short paper. It should also be noted that Tanabe qualifies the way of *zange* as "metanoetics", not "the way of repentance". The

concept of metanoetics involves metanoia as well as metanoesis, and the latter goes beyond simple repentance. Tanabe's new philosophical position was not a justification provided for his conversion but a creative deconstruction of modern philosophy.

CONCEPT OF METANOETICS

So, what is metanoetics? Tanabe coined the term for himself. He explains the need for the term:

There is another reason for using a word derived from a Western language, "Metanoetics", together with the Japanese term "zangedo". 'Metanoetics' carries the sense of "meta-noetics", denoting philologically a transcending of noetics, or in other words, a transcending of metaphysical philosophy based on contemplation or intellectual intuition achieved by the use of reason. "Meta-noetics" means transcending the contemplative or speculative philosophy of intellectual intuition as it is usually found in the realms of thought based on reason. A very important characteristic by which metanoetics is distinguished from ordinary mysticism or philosophies of intellectual intuition can be observed here: it is not a philosophy founded on the intuitive reason of *jiriki* (self-power), but rather a philosophy founded on action-faith-witness (*gyo-shin-sho*) mediated by the transformative power of *tariki* (Other-power).⁹

Thus, the reason Tanabe uses the word "metanoetics": consists in the double-meaning of the word; that is, "metanoetics implies, on the one hand, a self-awakening through a 'way' of repentance, a 'thinking-afterward' (metanoia), and on the other, suggests a self-conscious transcending of intuition and contemplation (metanoesis). This is why *zangedo* can be termed a Metanoetike or metanoetics".¹⁰ In other words, Tanabe's metanoetics is not only "the way of repentance" but also transcendence of intuition and contemplation.

FROM PHILOSOPHY TO NON-PHILOSOPHY: ABSOLUTE TRANSFORMATION THROUGH OTHER-POWER

Tanabe successively explores Western philosophers such as St. Augustine, Eckhart, Pascal, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Finally, he summarizes the Western systems of philosophy as thoughts of sages and intellectuals who would never abandon their philosophical viewpoint, and criticizing them as a “philosophy based on self-power”.¹¹ Tanabe, who had already realized his “own inability and impotence of any philosophy based on self-power”, had “no philosophy whatsoever on which to rely”.¹² In this way, he left Western thinkers and their philosophy, and moved toward Shinran’s Shin Buddhism, where he discovered non-philosophy.

Philosophy that is not a philosophy cannot be undertaken by one’s own power (*jiriki*), but must be acquired through Other-power (*tariki*). Tanabe writes, “This Other-power brings about a conversion in me that leads me in a new direction along a path hitherto unknown to me”.¹³ Here, he encounters Shinran’s *Kyogyoshinsho*, a work that originates in thirteenth-century medieval Japan, the main teaching of which consists in the trinity of action-faith-witness (*gyo-shin-sho*). Actually, Tanabe’s encounter with Shinran during the wartime was a salvation for this despairing philosopher since it liberated him from his philosophical impasse and made him realize the philosophical importance of the teaching of Shin Buddhism. Hence, for Tanabe, philosophizing implies the continual act of “practice-faith-witness” (*gyo-shin-sho*) of his own metanoia, performed by Other-power within himself.

DIALECTIC AS METANOETICS

The originality of Tanabe’s “philosophy that is not a philosophy” consists in his unique definition of the dialectic as the action of metanoesis. The dialectic that Tanabe presents as metanoetics is neither Hegelian nor Marxist, that is, neither idealistic nor materialistic. It is one’s metanoetic action mediated by the activity of the Other-power. In Chapter 6 of his *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe describes the difference between the

dialectic in Western tradition and the one that he understands as metanoetics:

Our dialectic ..., in contrast [to Pascal's notion of transformation or conversion] is based on the negative mediation of metanoesis which qualifies it as authentic dialectics: absolute negativity functioning through negative mediation as the mediation of absolute nothingness. This is the difference between Pascal's conversion of thought and what we have been speaking of as conversion through the action of metanoesis.¹⁴

Explaining Tanabe's dialectic in detail is not the purpose of this paper, however. But we can now address Dower's assertion, that Tanabe's position was a regression to nationalism, and whether he utilized Shinran's Shin Buddhism in order to justify his position and characterize traditional Japanese Buddhist wisdom as superior to Western philosophy. The defeat of his nation in war was simultaneously Tanabe's personal defeat as a philosopher. Tanabe's sincere commitment to his intellectual responsibility brought him to the point of self-denial. It was a conversion, but it was not, as Dower asserts, a simple regression to the traditional wisdom of Shin Buddhism or a form of nationalism. Rather, it was a creative, dialectical deconstruction of modern philosophy by way of denying what he had learned from Western philosophy. What he achieved was the transformation of philosophy to non-philosophy. He transcended the limits of reason so philosophy could become metanoetics, a process performed by the Other-power within himself.

Endnotes

¹John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1999, p.496.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, p.497.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵“As for myself, I no longer share this attitude [i.e. the self-awareness of the autonomy of reason] because I can no longer accept its underlying ideal of philosophy. The experience of my past philosophical life has brought me to realize my own inability and the impotence of any philosophy based on self-power. I have now no philosophy whatsoever on which to rely. I now find that the rational philosophy from

which I had always been able to extract an understanding of the rational forces permeating history, and through which I could deal rigorously with reality without going astray, has left me". *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi et al., University of California Press, 1986, pp.25-26. All the texts from Tanabe's work are quoted from this translation.

⁶*Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi, *op. cit.* Preface.

⁷Dower, *op. cit.*, p.497.?

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi, *op. cit.*, pp.2-3.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.3.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp.25-26.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, Preface.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.198.