Chapter 4

Ways of Japanese Thinking

GRAHAM PARKES

Using the life and ritual suicide (seppuku) of the contemporary Japanese novelist, Mishima Yukio, as a backdrop, this insightful essay by Graham Parkes clarifies for the Western sensibilities the multiple elements of the Japanese tradition. With an emphasis on philosophical thought (both Western and Japanese), Parkes discusses the traditions of food and the eating of meals, bushido (The Way of the Warrior), calligraphy, chanoyu, No theater, and Japanese film. All these elements of Japanese culture combine to provide the reader with new ways of understanding the Japanese aesthetic tradition.

In February of 1936, twenty-one junior officers in the Imperial Army of Japan led an uprising calculated to overthrow the government and restore supreme command of the armed forces to the emperor. They managed to assassinate three government ministers and occupy a small area of Tokyo near the imperial palace. Emperor Hirohito, however, demanded that the uprising be quashed. Overwhelmed by the imperial forces, two of the officers committed seppuku (ritual suicide by disembowelment) and the rest were executed.

In 1960, Mishima Yukio, who was becoming one of the best known writers in Japan, wrote a short story entitled "Patriotism," which was based on the abortive rebellion of 1936. The hero of the story is a young officer in the Imperial Guard, from whom his comrades have kept the dangerous conspiracy a secret since he is newly married and they want to obviate the risk of his young bride's being prematurely widowed. After the rebellion is launched, the officer is ordered to participate in the attack on the rebel forces; but rather
than take up arms against his comrades he resolves to commit *seppuku*. His wife expresses her desire to join him in death, and the officer agrees.

The husband and wife bathe, and then make love, the eroticism of the scene heightened by the prospect of imminent death. Mishima is one of the great prose stylists in modern Japanese, and the story builds to a climax that is overwhelmingly powerful even in English translation. The officer's self-disembowelment is described in loving and excruciating detail, as he plunges the sharp sword into the left side of his abdomen and pulls it across to the right. It is almost a relief when the wife follows her husband in death by stabbing herself in the neck with a dagger.

Five years after writing "Patriotism" Mishima made a film of the story, entitled *The Rise of Love and Death*, in which he himself played the role of the young officer who commits *seppuku*. Five years later, in 1970, at the head of a small band of comrades in a paramilitary organization he had founded, Mishima gained entry to the headquarters of the Army Self-Defense Force in Tokyo and captured its commander. From a balcony on the second floor he proceeded to harangue the troops whom he had ordered assembled outside, encouraging them to abolish the democratic form of government that had been established after the Second World War and to restore to Japan its true identity by reestablishing the emperor system.

Greeted by howls of derision, Mishima went back into the room where his comrades were holding the commander hostage, knelt down facing the balcony, and committed *seppuku*. His right-hand man, a university student by the name of Morita, followed his previous orders to behead him as soon as he had prolonged the agony. (The beheading by a "second," was a part of the ancient ritual.) Morita then disemboweled himself, and was beheaded in turn by a third member of the group. Mishima had been the most admired writer of his generation, and the Japanese public was profoundly shocked by his death—in part because this was the first incident of *seppuku* in Japan since just after World War II. A number of critics have remarked that with Mishima's death a special epoch of Japanese literature came to an end.

While there have been some forms of ritual suicide in the Western tradition, there is something profoundly alien to the Western sensibility about the particular form of *seppuku*. We can, many of us, imagine killing ourselves; but the idea of plunging a sword into one's abdomen and having the strength of will to keep the blade in (the musculature of the lower body naturally tries to evert it) as one pulls it across to the other side, slicing through a variety of vital organs and entrails, is surely incomprehensible to the large majority of

Westerners, Mishima was a gifted writer of extraordinary intelligence, and his voracious intellectual appetite encompassed a wide range of European literature and philosophy as well as classical East Asian learning. Being a great admirer of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, he was surely familiar with the chapter in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* called "On Free Death," and his suicide can certainly be seen as a consummate response to Zarathustra's dictum, "Die at the right time!" On the other hand, the method of his self-annihilation is quite alien to Western sensibilities, and he chose *seppuku* precisely because it is so quintessentially Japanese.

Insofar as philosophy is "the uncommonly stubborn attempt to think clearly," it is hard for us to be "philosophical" about Mishima's suicide. But if we try to think clearly about this man who saw his life and death as embodying traditional Japanese ideas, we stand to learn something about the way the Japanese have traditionally thought about life—and death. As in the case of China, however, we cannot expect philosophical thinking to look the same as it does in the Western tradition. Insofar as philosophy seeks "to discover how things, in the most general sense, hang together, in the most general sense," Japanese philosophy tends to concentrate on concrete things and relations within the world rather than on abstractions beyond it. In this it is again like Chinese philosophy, in part because the development of Japanese thought was greatly influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and Neo-Confucianism.

Indeed, the Japanese tradition is above all multiple, being composed of many heterogeneous elements; and Japan is one of the most fascinating of modern cultures because of the ways its enduring indigenous tradition has continually incorporated a wide range of foreign influences. A feature of this tradition that makes it quite different from its Western counterparts is that philosophy did not develop as a separate discipline in isolation from life, but was rather embodied in particular forms of practice. (It is significant that the Japanese word for philosophy, *tesugaku*, was coined only a little over a hundred years ago, to refer to the European systems of thought that began to be studied when Japan was opened up to the West.)

This is not to say that there are no texts in the Japanese tradition that contain thinking of the kind we call philosophical in the West. There are many such works, but relatively few of them have been translated into English, and many of these make very difficult reading. For one thing the content is often inherently complex, being an amalgam of native ideas with ideas from India, China, or—in the modern period—Europe. For another, the
Japanese language possesses far more inherent ambiguity and indeterminacy than do Indo-European languages, which makes a faithful translation quite taxing for the reader accustomed to Western philosophy.

Because Japanese philosophy is so closely allied to a variety of practices, one of the best ways to approach it is to read Japanese literature in translation, to look at Japanese art and architecture, see Japanese films, study Japanese martial arts, go to Japanese theaters, visit Japanese restaurants, and so on. The last part of this suggestion is not as frivolous as it may sound. In fact it is worth developing a little, so that we may appreciate how reflection upon a practice can bring to light a philosophy behind it—and also how an approach informed by inappropriate presumptions can blind us to what is really going on.

The first thing to notice about a Japanese meal is that how it looks is as important as how it tastes: the best Japanese cuisine is almost as much a feast for the eyes as it is a treat for the palate. Even in the most modest eating establishment, far from the metropolis, care is taken as a matter of course concerning the aesthetic appearance of the meal. And insofar as it provides satisfaction for the senses of sight and touch as well as taste, one usually eats less than usual before feeling satisfied. (The particular sense of satisfaction experienced after a good Japanese dinner is rarely accompanied by a feeling of overfullness—perhaps in part because savoring of the visual and tactile pleasures inclines one to eat more slowly.) Another thing to notice is that most of the meal is served at one time, rather than course by course as in the West. The advantage of this “nonlinear” way of eating is a remarkably wide range of tastes, as one gradually works one’s way through the various combinations of flavors afforded by a large number of small dishes laid out at the same time.

One of these dishes is usually miso soup served in a lacquer bowl.7 Now if the diners, following the injunction so beloved of Western mothers to “Drink your soup before it gets cold,” finish the soup first, before going on to the other dishes, he will have lost the opportunity to appreciate what Japanese cuisine is really about. But if they consume the soup Japanese-style, slowly and intermittently, they are able not only to savor the progression of different tastes as it cools but also to orchestrate the combinations of these changing tastes with the flavors of the other dishes. The meal can then be appreciated as a multilayered process rather than a single linear event—an appreciation that is impossible if the meal is approached from the perspective of Western preconceptions of ingestion.

But let us return from the sustenance of life to its curtailment in suicide. The death Mishima chose to end his life with and that life itself are emblematically Japanese. (On being criticized for affecting a Western lifestyle—a home

furnished in European rococo and a wardrobe of Italian suits, Levi’s, and T-shirts—Mishima responded that those were just the outer trappings. His real life, as a writer working late at night in his study, was Japanese through and through.) It is possible to extract from that life some salient features that serve to articulate a kind of intellectual framework with which to approach some of the ways of thinking that are the topic of this chapter. In short, Mishima chose his death, through destroying the body, in a ritual action that consummated his life as an aesthetic whole.

To choose one’s death as Mishima did is to consummate one’s life in a way that is impossible if one just lets things take their course and dies from natural causes. This kind of suicide affirms an understanding of death as inseparable from life rather than as an event that simply comes after it. When Socrates describes the true philosopher as “practicing dying,” or the Christian advocates “dying to the world” in order to be reborn, it is on the basis of an understanding of death as a separation of the soul from the body which grants access to a world beyond. But when the Japanese Zen thinkers speak of the “great death,” they refer to death experienced within life that leads to a rebirth in this world; and thus insofar as they distinguish something like a soul from the body, the major focus tends to be on the latter. Modern Japanese thinkers like to remark that whereas in the West philosophies of life have predominated, Eastern thought has tended to produce philosophies of life-and-death such as Buddhism and Taoism. In broad terms this is true, with some of the more recent “existential” philosophies in the West providing the exception that strengthens the general rule.4

The tendency of the Platonic-Christian tradition to privilege the soul over the body is manifest in the fact that it was not until Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century—and then, later, Merleau-Ponty—that European thinkers began to develop extensive philosophies of the body. In East-Asian thought, by contrast, the body has consistently been a focus of philosophical reflection, whether by virtue of the emphasis on ritual performance in the teachings of Confucius, the development of breathing and concentration techniques or physical skills in Taoism, or the practice of meditation in sitting, walking, and other physical activity in Zen Buddhism.5

Even though the ancient Greeks attached great importance to the training of the body, Plato’s association of the head with intellect and rational thought distracted the attention of the subsequent philosophical tradition from the body as a whole. Thinking came to be understood as an “internal” process, the outward somatic manifestations of which are relatively unimportant. Descartes’ denial of the body as in any way essential to our true nature as
“thinking beings” exaggerated this trend. The idea of mental interiority was, however, quite foreign to the thinkers of the classical Chinese tradition. For Confucius, the major task was to cultivate oneself as a human being in society by engaging in the ritual practices handed down from the ancestors: Tradition was in this way literally embodied. By disciplining the movements and postures of the body through ritual practice, one could refine the faculties and capacities of the whole human being. This attitude was maintained in the Taoist tradition that developed after Confucius—and thus was incorporated into Chinese Buddhism as well as the Japanese forms of Buddhism that were descended from it. This is why the ideas of Zen have traditionally embodied themselves in such activities as archery, swordplay, tea ceremony, Noh drama, painting, and calligraphy.

Chinese thought is predicated upon an aesthetic rather than a rational notion of order, and the same is true in general of the Japanese tradition. Aesthetics did not develop as a separate field of Western philosophy until the eighteenth century, and philosophies of art have traditionally been regarded as peripheral in comparison with metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. In East Asian thought, there has been no such marginalization of the aesthetic viewpoint: The texts of classical Taoist philosophy are some of the finest poetry ever written; the eighth-century Japanese thinker Kukai was a Buddhist priest and an accomplished painter and calligrapher; the Zen thinker Dogen (born 1200 CE) wrote exquisite poetry as well as poetic works of philosophy; the eighteenth-century Zen master Hakuin was a renowned poet, painter, and calligrapher as well as a thinker of the first rank.

But let us begin our approach by stepping back for some historical perspective. Because in Japan—more so than in most cultures—the past persists alongside (beneath or behind) the present, our understanding of Japanese ways of thinking will be all the more enhanced if we can get a sense of some of the factors that have historically conditioned them.6

The Major Sources: Shinto, Confucianism, Buddhism

The drama of Mishima’s “Patriotism” is played out against the backdrop of a devotion to Shinto. Holding pride of place in the young lieutenant’s home is a tablet from the Great Shrine at Ise, the religion’s most sacred site, and a photograph of the emperor, the high priest of Shinto—before which the lieutenant and his wife solemnly bow every morning. The code of honor and ethics followed by the hero of “Patriotism”—and the philosophy that Mishima himself came to espouse—was that of bushido, “the way of the samurai.” This philosophy is precisely a synthesis of elements of Shinto with ideas from the Confucian tradition and Buddhism.

Up until the last part of the nineteenth century, when Japan was opened to the West after several hundred years of self-imposed isolation, Japanese thinking had been fed by the three streams of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Let us begin with Shinto, which was the indigenous religion of Japan prior to the influx of any influence from outside, and which still informs many aspects of life in Japan today. (There are thousands of well-attended Shinto shrines in Japan, and most marriage ceremonies are still performed by Shinto priests.)

Shinto—the Japanese word means literally “way of the divine spirits”—is an animistic nature religion, according to which the entire cosmos is “ensouled” and animated by spirits, and which is in many respects similar to the religion of ancient Greece. Its two major components are a cult of nature, in which the sun, mountains, trees, waterfalls, rocks, and certain kinds of animals are worshipped as divine, and an ancestor cult in which reverence is paid to the spirits of the ancestors—again often as divinities. Another important idea in Shinto is that the Japanese nation is one large, extended family, with the emperor—as high priest and “father”—at the head. This notion began to be literalized in the so-called “nationalist” philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which held that the Japanese imperial family was directly descended from the gods of the primeval period. The idea of the Japanese nation as a family whose forefathers were of divine origin tends to give rise to a belief in the inherent superiority of the Japanese to all other races—a belief that formed the basis of the ultranationalist movements of the 1930s.

A salient feature of Shinto illustrates a contrast between the Japanese and the Western understandings of age and the reality of the past. The Great Shrine at Ise is dedicated to the ancestor of the imperial family, the sun goddess Amaterasu. This most ancient shrine in the country is also the newest. In order to avoid the impurity that comes with the decay of aging, the Ise shrine is destroyed and built anew every twenty years. Whereas in the West the age of a building depends on how old the materials of which it is made are, in Japan it is the form that counts. Not form in the Platonic sense of some antecedent pattern beyond the world of change, but form as concretely embodied in a finite, impermanent building. The ephemeral nature of existence, of which the Japanese appear to possess an especially keen awareness, is enacted in the perpetual destruction and reconstruction of the most sacred structure of the national religion.
The Japanese propensity for the intelligent and thorough appropriation of foreign influences is nowhere more apparent than in the massive borrowings from Chinese culture that took place in the sixth century and continued, on and off, over the next thousand years. The Japanese had developed no writing system of their own, and so the first and most basic thing to be "imported" was the ideographic system of written Chinese. Along with it came the philosophies embodied in that writing: namely, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The first two of these had originated around a thousand years prior to their arrival in Japan. Buddhism, which arose in India in the sixth century B.C.E., was transmitted in the first century of the Christian Era to China, where its development was influenced by the indigenous philosophy of Taoism during the five hundred years before it spread to Japan. A primary feature of Buddhist thinking is expressed in what it calls the "three characteristics of existence"—which turned out to harmonize especially well with the Japanese worldview. Most forms of Buddhism view existence being characterized by dukkha, frustration or unsatisfactoriness, anitya, impermanence, and anatta, which refers to the idea that nothing possesses an intrinsic "selfness." In the Buddhist view, it is the failure or refusal to acknowledge that existence is transitory through and through that gives rise to frustration. If existence is a continual process of "arising and passing away," then the idea that there are enduring, self-identical things—including human egos or selves—may be shown to be an illusion, a fabrication designed to mask the radically ephemeral nature of existence.

Buddhist thought is particularly opposed to the substantialist view that there are independently existing things, claiming that everything is "itself" only in relation to a set of conditions that make it what it is. And again, the same is true for the "non-thing" that is the human self: It, too, is what it is only in relation to other things. The idea that things do not possess any inherent "self-nature" was already current in some schools of Chinese thought, as was the idea of the world as constant process or flux. Thus when Buddhism spread from India to China, certain forms of it especially resonated with the indigenous philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism.

With respect to the influence of Confucian thought on Japanese thinking, the important ideas concern the ethical teachings: the "virtues" of sincerity, humaneness, righteousness, and filial piety. Equally important are the ideas underlying these virtues: an understanding of the self as a matrix of familial and social relationships rather than as something substantial, and an emphasis on ritual activity as a means toward a harmonious "ritual community."

Out of the interactions between Buddhism and Confucianism and Taoism there arose in the Tang dynasty in China (seventh and eighth centuries) an eminently practical form of Buddhism known as "Ch'an"—the Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning "meditation." Ch'an Buddhism renounced the recitation of holy scriptures (sutras) and the discussion of metaphysical theories in favor of the practice of meditation. However, the goal of this practice, enlightenment, was understood not as the attainment of some transcendent realm beyond the world of everyday affairs, but rather as the realization of a more authentic way of being within the realm of day-to-day life.

The basic premise of Ch'an Buddhism (as of its transformation into Zen in Japan) is that our normal, pre-enlightenment experience is conditioned by layers of conceptualization that prevent us from experiencing the world the way it is. (The plural marks a difference from the common Western conception of the way the world is.) This conceptualization is something we all grow up into quite naturally as we are acculturated into a particular social context through the acquisition of language. To use a visual metaphor for experience generally, it is as if the linguistic categories we acquire as we grow up place various kinds of filters over our eyes that color and distort our experience of the world.

The practice of Zen effects a return to the preconceptual level of the individual's being and to the most basic context of the person, which is understood as mu, or nothingness. The radical nature of this return is brought into relief when we recall that in China and Japan the person is normally understood as a function of social relationships. In stark contrast to the modern Western notion of the individual (especially as developed in the liberal democratic tradition), in East-Asian thought it is the group—whether the nation or the family—that is ontologically primary, and the individual a derivative aberration. Thus when one enters a Zen monastery—giving up one's former possessions, clothing, social standing, head of hair, and even one's name—all ties to one's former existence are severed and the context of one's personal identity is completely abandoned. In spite of the new and highly disciplined order prevailing within the monastery, the point of the Zen regime is to show the novice that the ultimate context for his being is precisely nothing.8

Dogen, the founder of the Soto school of Zen, refers to this process of self-transformation in which one's ordinary identity falls away as "the molting of body-mind." This molting allows one to experience and act from the "field of emptiness"—another Zen expression for the context of nothingness—without preconceptions, which in turn allows one's experience and actions to
be totally spontaneous and appropriate to the current situation. (People sometimes fail to realize that, according to Zen, if the situation happens to call for conceptualization, the appropriate response is to conceptualize.)

The founder of the other major school of Zen, the ninth-century Chinese master Rinzai, expresses a similar conception of the person by talking about "the true human of no rank." We have seen that the Japanese understanding of the self is above all relational, and especially in terms of social standing; the Rinzai Zen idea of "no rank" suggests that all human relations (to things as well as persons) are possible only in the deeper context of nothingness. Hakuin, a Japanese Zen master who flourished in the early eighteenth century and is responsible for a revitalization of the Rinzai school, was fond of talking about the "great death" rather than the return to nothingness. In order to see into the depths of one's true nature it is necessary, according to Hakuin's quite existential understanding of Zen, to undergo the "great death": one must "be prepared to let go one's hold when hanging from a sheer precipice" if one is to be able to "die and return again to life." This talk of the "great death" brings us now to a consideration of the philosophy and practice of *bushido*, the major tenet of which is summed up in the dictum, "The way of the samurai is death."

The Way of the Sword

The pretext on which Mishima paid his apparently cordial visit, on the day of his suicide, to the commander of the Army Self-Defense Force was that of showing him a beautiful ceremonial sword. From ancient times in Japan the sword has been regarded with an almost religious awe, and famous swordsmiths, who regard their art as being primarily spiritual rather than material, pass down the secrets of their special craft from master to pupil over the generations. Zen ideas and practice began to influence swordsmanship (the use as well as the making of the sword) around the beginning of the fourteenth century, and they played an increasingly important role in the development of the way of the sword over the succeeding centuries of civil strife in the country.

Because Buddhism, with its emphasis on cultivating compassion for all sentient beings, has a reputation of being one of the world's more peaceable religions, it may be thought strange that Zen should have such a close connection with swordsmanship. But from the Zen perspective everything depends on the character and integrity of the one wielding the sword: if one's will is directed toward annihilating evil and against agents that stand in the way of justice and harmony, then the sword—even though it kills—becomes what Zen calls a "sword of life" rather than of death.

The *bushi*, or samurai warrior, carried two swords: a long one for combat, and a short one to kill himself with—if that should be necessary. The most important thing for a samurai was his honor as a loyal servant of his master, and if he were humiliated by defeat or about to be taken prisoner, he would have no hesitation in turning the short sword upon himself. This attitude is a manifestation of a more general readiness to die—and especially to die for one's lord—that is the distinguishing mark of the Japanese samurai. Let us consider the role of this idea that "the way of the samurai is death" in the teaching and discipline of swordsmanship.

The most important principle of samurai swordsmanship is the injunction to enter combat, when combat is unavoidable, *absolutely prepared to die*—with no concern whatsoever for saving one's skin. This somewhat paradoxical idea is more comprehensible if one considers the combination of Confucian and Zen Buddhist elements in *bushido*. In speaking of the difficulty of attaining the ideal of true "humaneness," Confucius emphasized that the requisite ritual activity must not only be technically precise but must also be informed by the performer's heart or spirit. Similarly, *bushido* stresses the discipline of the whole person, the training of the psychological and spiritual aspects of the warrior as well as the physical. The idea is that once one has undergone the requisite self-discipline and trained the body to its utmost limits, the appropriate activity will flow effortlessly.

To understand this idea (which is also quite Taoist) it may help to consider an example from the field of competitive sports in the West. Even given an innate talent for tennis, for instance, the training necessary to acquire the psychological coordination that it takes to win a championship game is long and demanding. But once one has undergone such training, which may involve considerable analytical reflection upon various swings and strokes (not to mention a good deal of boredom and frustration), the appropriate frame of mind in which to play a championship match would appear to be one of relative "emptiness." As in Zen, the idea is to free oneself of preconceptions and expectations. If one starts to think about how to respond to a particular serve, one is certain to fluff the return. And even amateur players learn early on that emotional upset or nervousness about losing a crucial point virtually guarantees that one will lose it.

What is called for—and the corresponding point can surely be made about most competitive sports—is an attitude that is open, yet free from all
extraneous influences, a relaxed but intense concentration on the event of the opponent's striking the ball. Then the return happens as if "by itself"—without one's having to think "Now the opponent is in that part of the court moving in this direction, so I need to place the ball over there" and then issue commands to the musculature to move in such and such a way so as to put one's body in the right position to execute a forehand volley at the appropriate angle.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition one enters into the spirit of a physical discipline by cultivating the condition of mushin, or "no-mind," which again connotes an openness untrammeled by ego-centered prejudices or preconceptions. (The Sino-Japanese word shin means "heart," and thus carries broader and less strictly intellectual connotations than the English "mind.") The term also suggests the respect accorded to what one might call the deep "wisdom of the body." As mentioned earlier, the Japanese tradition in general, and Zen in particular, tends not to employ as strict a dichotomy between mind and body as Western thought does—as evidenced by the common use in Zen texts of Dogen's compound term "body-mind."

On the question of where to direct the mind or focus one's body awareness, the master of the sword is likely to tell the student at first to keep the mind in the lower part of the abdomen, just below the navel. (This area is regarded by the Chinese and the Japanese as the center of the body's vital activity. The Japanese call it the hara, which is why the alternative reading of seppuku is hara-kiri, "cutting the abdomen.") The more advanced student is instructed to expand that focus throughout the entire body. In the words of Takuan, addressed to the sword master Yagyu Munenori: "If you don't put the mind anywhere, it will go to all the parts of the body and extend throughout its entirety." In this way one's awareness will extend through to the sword as well, which thus virtually becomes part of the body—just as the racket becomes an extension of the arm in the case of the championship tennis player.

The parallel with tennis goes only so far, however, because the stakes in swordsmanship are infinitely higher. An instant of emotional upset or a moment's reflective thought on the court at Wimbledon can mean the loss of a valuable prize, it is true. But the Japanese sword is such a fiendishly sharp instrument that a corresponding lapse in a sword fight means the loss of a hand, a limb, or one's head. And losing one's head in that context is a literal and irrevocable loss.

If we recall now that the samurai is encouraged to enter combat absolutely prepared to die and with no thought of preserving himself, we can see that the openness or emptiness of "no-mind" coincides in an interesting way with the nothingness of death. We can also appreciate the further paradox that the Zen emphasis on natural action, when it re-emerges as a consequence of intense physical and mental discipline in something like the spontaneous activity of the consummate swordsman, coincides now with a way of being that is quite unnatural. This is not meant to suggest that it is artificial, but rather that the way to realize one's full humanity lies in going against what is naturally given so that one may sublime, as it were, one's human nature.

In animals the instinct for self-preservation is fundamental and pervasive, and it is naturally strong in humans, too. However, the almost superhuman achievement of the Zen swordsman, which manifests in activity that appears equal to the most finely honed instinctual responses in the animal world, goes hand in hand with a remarkable suspension of the instinct for self-preservation. Many of the stories told about the best known Zen masters of the sword suggest that they have acquired extraordinary powers (some of the better samurai films convey a sense of this). At this level of achievement it is as if the life-force is negated in such a way that one becomes totally—and almost supernaturally—alive.

Let us now go on to consider some other, less violent arts of the hand that have inspired the ideals of Zen.

**Arts of the Hand**

Although Mishima was a writer, he lived in an era during which writing was less an art of the hand than it was before the advent of printing (a Chinese invention). Formerly in Japan, as in China, writing well meant not only authoring fine poems and essays, but also producing manuscripts that were themselves works of art. Because of the special nature of the Chinese ideographic writing system, the fine poem will look as beautiful as it sounds—and indeed the way it looks is an important part of the poetry. For someone writing after the invention of printing, the act of writing is bound to seem a less immediate type of action than it was in the days when readers would have before them the actual traces of the author's moving hand.

We shall see later how this perceived lack of connection with the world drove Mishima to take up more dynamic arts of the hand and body than writing, like kendo (a kind of fencing with swords of bamboo, but more in the style of sabers than foils). In so doing he was following an East-Asian tradition—grounded in the teachings of Confucius, among others—with respect to which the Western dichotomy between theory and practice, or reflection and action, fails to hold. Japanese history is full of figures whose
achievements undercut such dichotomies: emperors who were exquisitely cultured individuals, Zen masters who were consummate swordsmen, and warriors who were exemplary men of letters. Over the centuries in which Japan was torn by civil wars, there grew up a tradition of samurai who were at the same time literati, men of refined culture who wielded the pen (or, rather, the brush) with as much skill as the sword.

Closely related to the art of calligraphy (shōdo: literally, “the way of writing”) is sumi-e, monochrome painting with brush and ink. The most striking thing about both Chinese and Japanese brush painting at first sight is the large amount of “empty space.” Until fairly recently it was traditional in most Western painting to have the canvas completely covered with paint, for the space outlined by the picture frame to be filled. By contrast, in many masterpieces of Japanese brush painting as little as 15 to 25 percent of the surface of the scroll has ink on it. In view of the influence of Taoism and Zen on this art form, the relative emptiness of the canvas can be understood as an evocation of the nothingness that forms the context of all particular things.

The technique of monochrome painting has much in common with that of swordsmanship: The training under a master is long and rigorous, and the goal is to let the brush move itself. The appropriate condition for painting is one of “no-mind,” and one’s awareness is dispersed throughout the whole body—and even beyond the brush to the blank paper. In the case of painting a persimmon, a branch, or a bird, the idea is to have contemplated the subject long enough so that one has actually become one with it; then the subject literally paints itself. (Something like this can happen in the case of stilllife or landscape painting in the West, too, insofar as the artist contemplates the subject with sufficient concentration to achieve a kind of union with it.)

While it is a delight to watch the exquisite movements of a master calligrapher or sumi-e artist letting the ink flow on to the paper, it is the product rather than the process that is regarded as the work. But in several other art forms inspired by Zen the moving body of the artist is itself part of the work of art.

One of the most quintessential expressions of Japanese culture is the tea ceremony (cha-dō, “the way of tea,” or chanoyu, literally, “hot water for tea”). Tea was originally brought to Japan from China some time during the sixth or seventh century, and the practice of drinking tea appears to have established itself first of all in the Buddhist seminaries and schools. The green tea that is still the staple in Japan is a vitalizing beverage that helps keep one alert during meditation—and in life in general. After relations with China were broken off at the end of the ninth century, the custom went into decline, and was not revived again until the twelfth century, thanks to the Zen master Eisai.

At first tea gatherings were rather grand social affairs that took place in elaborate Chinese-style tea pavilions and often involved tea-tasting competitions. In the course of the Middle Ages the ceremonies gradually became simpler and at the same time more strictly governed by rules of ritual. This happened in part through the adoption of the tea ceremony by the samurai class, whose rules of conduct were being formulated at the time, and also under the influence of the simple rules of life-style of the Sōtō school of Zen, whose founder was Dōgen. There is also a strong Confucian element in the tea ceremony, as we shall see.

While the primary requisite for the tea ceremony consists of simplicity and an avoidance of ostentation, the specifications for the utensils, the room, and the surroundings are remarkably strict, on the principle, not entirely foreign to Western thinking, that it is only within a context of the most rigid discipline that the utmost freedom for creativity can be exercised. On the surface, the ceremony is simple; a small number of guests gather in an anteroom. They proceed through a modestly but carefully laid out and well tended garden to a simple thatched hut built of wood and plaster. Before entering the hut, which usually consists of one rather small room, each guest Washes his or her hands in a stone water basin—a symbolic cleansing from the dust of the everyday world. They enter across a stone threshold and through a low entranceway with a simple sliding door covered with white rice paper.

The room is small, some ten feet square, and suffused by a subdued light coming through the translucent sliding screens that make up much of the walls. The only form of ornament is an alcove built into one of the walls: a vase with a simple arrangement of flowers in it, or else a hanging scroll inscribed with Chinese characters or a monochrome painting. In the middle of the floor of tatami (rectangular mats made of tightly woven rice straw) is a hearth in which charcoal is burned to heat the iron kettle for water.

The host enters through a sliding door in one of the other walls, greets the guests and passes round a dish of small cakes while preparing the tea. In a precisely determined sequence of ritual movements, the host uses a special ladle to rinse the tea bowl with hot water, puts two spoonfuls of powdered tea into the bowl, pours a ladleful of hot water into the tea bowl, and stirs the tea with a whisk made of split bamboo. Originally the guests would share one bowl, wiping the rim with a piece of rice paper before passing it on; a variation of the ceremony uses one bowl for each guest. As the guests slowly sip the tea,
they may compliment the host on its taste and color, admire the tea bowls and utensils, and converse for a while before taking their leave. That is all; and yet when it goes well, those present have the impression of contacting the deepest levels of human being, and of experiencing from the narrow confines of that simple hut a far wider world.

All features of the room, of the ornaments, and the utensils for brewing and serving the tea are precisely specified as to their optimal size, shape, color, and so on. The specifications change, however, according to the time of day the ceremony is performed as well as the season of the year. Certain kinds and colors of flowers, for example, are recommended for certain times of day but not for others. The ritual gestures of the hands with which the host makes and serves the tea are too complex to be described: They have to be seen to be appreciated. As in the practice of the Zen sword, the techniques are learned over a long period of instruction under a master of the discipline, until they can be performed quite naturally. To watch an accomplished tea person simply lay the ladle on top of the kettle, for instance, is to witness an action quite awe-inspiring in its elegance and economy.

The Zen ideas that inform the ceremony ensure that all the participants are there with full attention to the present activity. At the same time, aware of the age of the ceremony itself and of many of the utensils being used to perform it (the form of the activities being centuries old, and the utensils fashioned long before the participants were born), they feel the flow of the past rise up through the present moment. A beautiful account of this phenomenon is to be found in the well-known short novel by Kawabata Yasunari, A Thousand Cranes. The tea ceremony serves as a background to the entire narrative, and two or three bowls play a role in the story that is—strangely—almost human, insofar as they are three to four hundred years old and so have passed through the hands of generations of tea connoisseurs.

More recently the bowls in question have been owned by the young protagonists' parents and their respective lovers, and after the deaths of the parents the bowls evoke the presence of the deceased with an almost supernatural power, at the same time prompting premonitions of the deaths of the survivors in turn. The young man and woman, Kikuji and Fumiko, are looking at a bowl that was a favorite of Kikuji's deceased father, when Fumiko remarks how like the father the bowl is. And so reminiscent of its previous owner is a bowl inherited from her late mother that the bowls together look like "two beautiful ghosts." And yet since the bowls are completely "sound and healthy," "life seemed to stretch out over them in a way that was almost sensual."

In the tea ceremony the bowl is handled with such care and reverence that—while of course it will not last for ever—it is likely to survive beyond the death of any particular owner or user. (Should the bowl be broken, it is often repaired using gold.) The awareness that this bowl will continue to exist long after I have passed on, even though a part of my being may somehow survive with it—to the extent that it has been closely associated with me during my lifetime—helps me to focus on the series of unique moments in which I drink from it. The realizations that there are a finite number of such moments yet to come and that every sip is potentially the last, serve to intensify the experience of the present moment.

An important dimension of the ceremony is illuminated if we recall the Confucian conception of the place of ritual activity in human life, where such practice is understood to be integral to cultivating and refining one's essential humanity. For a ceremony to be genuine in the Confucian sense, not only must the technique be faultless and effortless, but the performer must perform the actions with "heart and soul." (Lack of heart is as obvious to a connoisseur as a perfunctory handshake is to a sensitive individual, or a coldly mechanical rendition of a piano sonata to a true music lover.) In the case of tea, consummate technique must be accompanied by a sense that the participants are fully engaged in the human interaction. As the host serves the tea, or the guest bows to the host, the activity expresses an awareness that here are two human beings who have come together under the heavens and on a particular piece of the earth, and in the context of a particular configuration of the elements of fire and water, wood and metal, in order to partake of a unique and vivifying beverage.

Just as in Zen the awareness that accompanies sitting meditation (zazen) is to be extended throughout one's waking life, so the atmosphere of the tea ceremony optimally comes to pervade the practitioner's entire being, so that every meal and all other waking activities may become occasions for experiencing the ultimate context of nothingness that is the womb of all human possibilities. The greatest contrast would be the kind of "eating on the run" encouraged by the institution of the drive-through fast food outlet. The consumption while driving of a bland styrofoam-enclosed mass is something that—even if it helps sustain life—barely enters the consumer's consciousness (perhaps just as well) let alone vivifies the experience of life itself.

Even as present-day Japan succumbs to the institution of fast food, there remains a custom that faintly recalls the Zen attitude underlying the way of tea. In the otherwise prosaic situation of drinking beer, for example, whether in a public place or a private home, one may find one's companion proffering
the bottle, neck first. The appropriate response is to lift one's glass a little off the table so that the other person can fill it. The roles are usually reversed on the second round. Rather than dismiss this custom as a minor bit of useless ritual, one might see it as analogous to the tea ceremony in its function of bringing to awareness the uniqueness of the human situation in which the participants find themselves.

Noh Drama: Poetry, Music, Dance

Several critics maintain that the plays Mishima wrote based on the traditional Noh drama are among his finest accomplishments. Noh (the term means literally “accomplishment,” and was used early on to refer to the special abilities of actors, singers, and dancers) is another Zen-influenced art form in which the human body is part of the work. It was developed during the fourteenth century from a mixture of art forms such as the sacred dances of Shinto, court dances concerning warriors, and other forms of recitation and proto-opera. The traditional founder, Kan'ami had a son, Zeami, who became a protegé of the shogun of Japan at the time, an enlightened ruler who was a great patron of the arts and a devotee of Zen. This high regard for Zen was shared by Zeami, and Buddhist ideas influenced both the many classic plays he authored and his treatises laying out the basic principles of the art.

Noh is a highly refined art form that combines poetry, drama, music, song, and dance in a way that is somewhat reminiscent of ancient Greek tragedy. The plays are generally based on simple, ancient, and archetypal themes deriving from some of the most familiar poems, stories, and legends in the Japanese canon. (This is just as well, since the highly poetic dialogue is delivered in such an idiosyncratic combination of song and chant that it is more or less incomprehensible even to native Japanese speakers, many of whom attend the plays equipped with the written texts.) There is generally very little in the way of plot in these plays; they aim rather at the development of a particular mood or emotion or attitude basic to human psychology.

A primary aim of the drama, according to Zeami, is the production of the mood of yugen, a Zen term that connotes “what lies beneath the surface,” the subtle as opposed to the obvious. The original meaning of the word is “obscure and dark,” but it came to refer to a special kind of beauty that is only partly revealed, that is elusive yet full of meaning and tinged with a wistful sadness. It also has connotations of the graceful elegance of the refined aristocrat. The talk of something “beneath the surface” is not meant to suggest the dichotomy between appearance and reality familiar in Western metaphysics, but comes rather from the Zen idea that layers of conceptualization obscure our experience, and that certain art forms may enable us to “see through” those layers.

There is no attempt in Noh at realism. The back of the stage consists of simple wood paneling on which is painted a stylized pine tree, and a chorus and several musicians sit on the stage in full view of the audience. The “orchestra” comprises a flute and two hand drums, with sometimes a third stick drum in addition. The rhythms of the percussion are based on an extremely long and often irregular beat, which has the effect after a while of profoundly altering the audience’s sense of time. (Zen adepts might claim that the rhythms help one to break through the conceptual overlay; psychologists, that they modify the brainwaves in such a way as to activate the deep unconscious.) On occasion, in some of the dances, the music can become remarkably Dionysian in its frenzied crescendos, evoking no doubt the music of the Shinto festivals of which Mishima was so enamored. The singing of the chorus sometimes comments on the action and sometimes substitutes for the singing of the principal actor when he is too involved in the dance to be able to sing. But the most striking feature of the Noh is the way the acting techniques combine with the specially designed costumes and masks.

With the movements and gestures of Noh drama we are again on familiar ground—a ground prepared by our discussion of the role of ritual activity in refining the human being. The gestures are highly stylized and for the most part extremely subtle and restrained—only occasionally building up into climaxes of wild dance—and they are perfected only after years of the most intense physical training on the part of the actor. The costumes, which generally cover the entire body, are themselves works of art, and when worn by an accomplished actor they become kinetic sculptures of breathtaking beauty. Some of the costumes have an uncanny way of making the wearer appear to defy the laws of gravity. It sometimes looks, for instance, as if it is physically impossible for a human being to stand that way without falling over; this phenomenon conduces to the often desired effect of a more-than-human presence.

The Noh mask is carved from wood, usually cypress, and then covered with layer upon layer of paint. The making of these masks is another Japanese art that has been handed down from master to apprentice over the centuries, and some of the older ones are today regarded as “national treasures.” There are many different types of mask, and one of their primary functions is to enable the principal actor (all Noh actors and musicians are men) to play a
wide range of parts: young girl, old man, angry demon, and so on. Sometimes a different mask is used for the second part of the play, since the text often requires a warrior or a woman to turn into a ghost, a demon, an animal, or even a god.

Unlike the masks that were used in Greek tragedy, the Noh mask is slightly smaller than the face, and this has the effect of delocalizing the sound of the actor's voice in such a way that it seems to come, strangely, from "around" the figure rather than from it. The masks are designed to have a neutral, intermediate expression, so that very slight movements of the actor's head, in combination with the appropriate bodily gestures, are able to produce the illusion of a remarkable variety of facial expressions. The synergism of all these features gives the masked figure of the actor a strangely nonhuman or even superhuman appearance—again in a way similar to the overall effect of the masked actors of Greek tragedy.

During the half-hour before he goes on stage, the Noh actor sits alone and in silence in what is called the "mirror room" and contemplates the mask he is about to put on. During the last five minutes, he looks into the eyes of the mask, at the center of which is nothing, in order to "see" the character about to be acted. This period of meditation allows him to empty himself so that he will be able to act out of the context of no-mind, or nothingness, thus letting the archetypal figure he is to portray "play through" him. Correspondingly, the more the audience is able to let its preconceptions concerning what it is seeing fall away, the more profound the experience that will ensue. The effects of the music and the somewhat hypnotic chanting of the poetry of the text can thus combine to short-circuit everyday consciousness and elicit a profound response from the deeper layers of the self.17

Because Zen is not a set of dogmas but rather a practice that transforms one's relationships to the world, it is not surprising that the ideas behind it should continue to inform Japanese thought and culture even after the radical break effected by modernization, which began a little more than a century ago. In the last part of this chapter we shall consider some later transformations of Japanese thinking through the correspondingly modern medium of cinema.

Projections in a Western Medium: The Art of Film

In 1853 several warships of the U.S. Navy commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Edo Bay, carrying a request (amounting to a demand) that Japan open her ports to foreign trading ships. The island had been closed to foreign influence for almost three hundred years. A number of people in the government were quick to gauge the situation. They realized that the only way for Japan to avoid the fate of colonization that had befallen all her neighbors in Asia was to modernize quickly enough to develop technology to defend the country against foreign aggression. In 1868 the feudal system that had held sway for several centuries was abolished, and some measure of political power was restored to the imperial house of Meiji (hence the name Meiji Restoration). Western technology and culture were imported with amazing rapidity and thoroughness: Promising Japanese political leaders and scholars in all areas of the arts and sciences were sent by the hundreds to the major countries of Europe, as well as to the United States. Their assignment was to learn the ways of the West so that they could return home and supervise the appropriation of Western ideas in fields ranging from philosophy to physics.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, not only were French positivism and British utilitarianism being received with special enthusiasm, but also—in the interests of a thorough historical understanding of Western thought—ancient Greek and Roman thought. But it was German philosophy that found the most fertile ground for transplantation—from Leibniz and Kant, through German Idealism, to the more recent philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.18 To this day, philosophers in Japan are more likely to be fluent in German than in English or French; and if one wants to study Buddhist philosophy there, for example, one has to go to a department of religious studies, since most philosophy departments are concerned only with continental European thought and Anglo-American (analytic) philosophy.

The fact that relatively few contemporary philosophers in Japan are interested in Japanese philosophy is a symptom of just how massive and comprehensive the importation of Western ideas after the Meiji Restoration was. While the appropriation of Western philosophical ideas has greatly enriched Japanese culture, it was undertaken with such zeal as to almost preclude a continuing engagement with the indigenous tradition of Japanese thought. It is true that Shinto still functions on the everyday level as a vessel for whatever thoughts and feelings the average Japanese may have concerning "the meaning of life," the nature of death and the beyond, and so on. However, it seems that the majority of the contemporary population has been cut off from the traditional ideas and practices of Buddhism and Confucianism—and the arts and disciplines that sprang from them— which sustained the development of so many centuries of Japanese culture. The "Kyoto School" philosopher Nishitani Keiji argues in a book on nihilism written in 1949 that this severance
from the tradition on the intellectual and existential levels has introduced into modern Japanese life a deep-seated nihilism that is all the more powerful for remaining mostly unconscious.  

There is really no equivalent in the West to the shock caused by modernization in Japan. A country with a two-thousand-year-old tradition cuts itself off from the rest of the world for a period of a dozen generations, and then is suddenly forced into the wholesale adoption of a totally alien set of values—a process that necessitates in large part a radical break with indigenous traditions. The situation was exacerbated because the importation of Western ideas was carried out uncritically, so it passed unnoticed that many of the systems of thought that were brought in were themselves beginning to collapse. The import of Nietzsche's proclamation of "the death of God" was lost on the avid Japanese appropriators of turn-of-the-century European culture. Nobody realized that the ideals that had sustained the enormous expansion of the Western powers were themselves crumbling from within, that the virus of nihilism was present in the ideational stock that was so indiscriminately transplanted to Japanese soil.

This is not to deny that much of the past persists alongside the manifestations of modernity in Japan. But while the integration of modern Western ideas with the quite different ways of thinking that formerly sustained the development of the indigenous culture has been enormously fruitful—as evidenced by Japan's current economic domination of the world—it has also engendered a certain tension between an outer fullness and an inner void. Nietzsche remarked on the efficacy of hard and prolonged work as a way of covering over the abyss of nihilism, and it is hard to resist the impression that the frenetic industriousness of contemporary Japanese life serves to conceal a yawning emptiness at the core of it. The question of what "Japaneseess" consists in has been something of a national obsession since even before the Meiji period, and one suspects that the periodic outbreaks of aggressive nationalism that have occurred during this century may also stem from an inadequate response to the issue of nihilism. If all other sources of meaning for one's life appear to have dried up, then at the very least the meaning of it all is that one is Japanese.  

This line of thinking is going to take us back full circle to Mishima, but on the way let us consider another engagement with the problem of nihilism that dates from shortly after the publication of Nishihara's book on the topic. The art of film, which provides another example of the way Japan has appropriated from the West in order to produce work of the first rank, will afford us a final approach to Japanese thought by way of a peculiarly modern medium. While Kurosawa's Rashomon (1950) is probably the Japanese film that is best known in the West, his Ikiru (1952) is in many ways more profound. The title is the plain form of the verb "to live" and may best be translated as "living." In any case, the topic of the film is living, or how to live, in the face of death—and with this we return to a major theme in our discussion of bushido.

The film begins with a close-up of an X-ray of the protagonist's stomach, which (the narrator's voice-over tells us) shows symptoms of cancer. The protagonist's exterior is presented in the next shot, where we see him—his name is Watanabe and he is the chief of the Citizens' Section in City Hall—sitting at his desk. Shortly thereafter the narrator informs us that the main character "is not very interesting yet. He's just passing the time. . . . It would be difficult to say that he is really alive." As Watanabe looks through a pile of papers, stamping them as he goes—the epitome of the automaton like bureaucrat—the narrator remarks, "This is pretty bad. He is like a corpse, and in fact he has been dead for the past twenty-five years."

In the context of the strict work ethic of postwar Japan, the film's opening scenes are a stinging indictment of the stultifying nature of office work in the public sector—but also, by extension, of all the kinds of work with which modern Japanese narcotize their existence. And because a much larger part of one's identity in Japan comes from one's occupation than is the case in most other countries, Kurosawa's criticism cuts deeply into the question of what it means to be a human being in modern Japanese society. On the other hand, one could argue that at least one feature of bushido persists in contemporary Japanese life: the sense of honor and duty to one's superiors. It is common, for example, for politicians or heads of companies in Japan to resign at the first public sign of impropriety on their part, in order to save face and leave the image of the party or company untainted. (This response seems incomprehensible to chief executive officers in this country, where the immediate reaction is always to announce one's intentions to fight to the bitter end while one searches for someone else to lay the blame on.)

Watanabe goes to the hospital to get the results of some tests that have been done because of a stomach problem. The doctor has diagnosed the cancer and reckons that the patient has only six months to live, but when Watanabe comes in, the doctor lies to him (as is still the custom in Japan in such cases), saying "it's just a light case of ulcers." But, as a result of a strange encounter just before going into the doctor's consulting room, Watanabe knows the
truth. The realization of his imminent death serves to pull him out of his absorption in his job, with the result that he abruptly stops going in to the office—after not missing a day's work for twenty-five years.

He hopes for some solace from his son and daughter-in-law, with whom he lives, but they callously reject him before he can tell them about his devastating realization. Thus an even more fundamental context for Watanabe's identity than his job—his relationship to his family—is shattered. We learn later that after Watanabe's wife died he declined to remarry out of consideration for his son, and Watanabe himself at one point explains his total dedication to his deadening work as being "all for my son's sake." Such parental self-sacrifice (though usually on the part of the mother) is the norm in Japan, and is the counterpart of the Confucian filial piety that parents expect from their offspring. So, to a degree that may be extreme even in Japan, Watanabe has devoted himself to the raising of his son in addition to his work; and now, with his son's rejection of him, as well as his alienation from his job, everything that gave his life meaning has collapsed. The abyss of nihilism yawns as it seldom does in a normal Japanese life; the nothingness of death stares him in the face in true existentialist fashion.

The protagonist's response to his confrontation with death is quite consonant with Western existentialist thinking as well as with Zen. Rather than reject or attempt to transcend the everyday routines of his life, Watanabe re-engages them, transfigured, with an unprecedentedly vital enthusiasm. He throws himself back into his job, but in a completely new way, devoting his energies to having an insubstantial swampy area drained and a neighborhood park built in its place. He thereby succeeds, in his last months, in getting something genuinely meaningful done in the context of his formerly deadening occupation. But this account of some of the major themes of the film gives no indication of the cinematic techniques with which Kurosawa elaborates these themes and lends them such power. The movie is one of the great masterpieces of mid-twentieth-century cinema—as are the works of another Japanese director during the same period, whose primary concern is with stresses within the family that are occasioned by the modernization of the country. (With this focus we move away from the major concerns of Mishima, but the Japanese sense of self is so intimately bound up with the family that the detour is justified.)

Ozu Yasujiro, who between 1927 and 1962 made around sixty-five feature films, is often referred to as the most "Japanese" of Japanese film directors. If a feature of being "Japanese" is being eclectic in one's ability to appropriate foreign influences—Ozu was a keen admirer of early Hollywood movies—then this judgment is apt. At any rate, there are few better ways to get a feel for the modernizing Japanese culture of the 1950s than to see some of Ozu's films of the period.

Ozu's films almost invariably take as their subject the family, with whatever drama there is being provided by the process of the family's dissolution. Since the sense of self in Japan is always closely bound up in relationships, and especially family relationships, the breaking up of the family provides rich material for human drama. Ozu's treatment is sufficiently penetrating psychologically that in his films the family become a microcosm for the whole society and even—insofar as his characters transcend cultural boundaries—for the human world in general.

The portrayal of the family takes place mostly in the home, and no other director has been as successful as Ozu in presenting the internal architecture of the Japanese house as an embodiment of the soul and spirit of its inhabitants. Ozu is also famous for his low positioning of the camera: It is usually only three feet from the floor, which might seem odd until one realizes that this is eye-level for someone sitting in the traditional Japanese way (on one's heels or cross-legged) on a tatami-matted floor. Ozu uses silence, stillness, and the stark contrasts of black and white film in ways that evoke a mood strongly reminiscent of Zen. Over the decades he refined his filmic technique relentlessly, returning repeatedly to the same stories and themes, and using the same actors and costume over long periods of time, in order to strip down the essentials of his art to the bare minimum. In his mature work, pretty much the only form of transition is the cut; the camera hardly ever moves, and the length of the shots stays remarkably constant. On the one hand, this pacing gives Ozu's films a somewhat meditative tone with an occasionally hypnotic effect, and on the other it conveys a strong sense of the inevitability of fate in human affairs.

Some of Ozu's films directly invoke the spirit of Zen. Life is, for instance, contains scenes of a tea ceremony (though very much a "society" affair), a Noh play, and the famous sand and rock garden at Ryoanji temple in Kyoto. (There are also several scenes in this film where characters pour drinks for each other.) The extent to which Ozu has distilled the essence of Japanese culture of that period is remarkable. And in the course of elaborating his customary theme of the breakup of the family, he conveys a powerful sense of the dichotomy that is probably more radical in Japan than in any other modern society: that between outer appearances and one's true inner feelings.

The story of Life is simple: A widowed university professor lives with his daughter Noriko, who in her fondness for her father is happy to take
Having left the world of Mishima, it will be in the spirit of Ozu to effect an abrupt cut back, in order to gather together the threads of Japanese thought we have been considering.

Mishima's Ends

At the age of thirty, having devoted the major part of his life up to then to literature, which—though itself a form of action—is hardly a very physical activity, Mishima resolved to take up bodybuilding, a discipline he engaged in for the rest of his life. This was partly an attempt (apparently successful) to overcome a tendency toward ill health, but it was also Mishima's way of countering the tendency of writing to "corrode reality away" before he had a chance to experience life directly. Over the ensuing fifteen years he became proficient at boxing, karate, and kendo. Having been born into an aristocratic family, Mishima may, in a certain sense, have been returning to his roots in these endeavors. He also saw himself as participating in a revival of the old samurai ideal of combining the ways of the martial and the literary arts. He gives a fascinating and, at times, enigmatic account of this aspect of his life in the long essay Sun and Steel, written in 1968.27

While there was surely a strong element of narcissism in Mishima's concern for the body during the last part of his life (a concern intensified, it seems, by his homosexuality), his devotion to various forms of physical regimen nevertheless situated him authentically in the Japanese tradition of arts and letters. He was obsessed from early on by the desire to die "a beautiful death," and believed this would be impossible unless the body had been developed to perfection. It is an impressive fact about Mishima's suicide that on the morning of the day he ended his life he sent to the publisher the final installment of the fourth volume of his last work, The Sea of Fertility.28 There is a sense that Mishima had reached the height of his powers, that he knew it, and that he had no wish to go on to live a life of both physical and artistic decline. His suicide would thus be his ultimate aesthetic act.

Toward the end of his life, Mishima developed an interest in Japanese Neo-Confucianist philosophy, and especially in its idea of the importance of the unity of thought and action.29 Since he had come to think that Japanese culture had degenerated lamentably since the Second World War, and his recent attempts to call attention to this decline through polemical essays had fallen on deaf ears, it was a logical consequence of his philosophy that he...
should take more drastic action. To this extent Mishima's suicide was in keeping with the tradition of *kantō*, a type of *seppuku* whose purpose was reparation with one's feudal lord or a more general reproach of the ruling powers.60

One can assemble a multiplicity of plausible perspectives, negative as well as positive, on Mishima's suicide—which appropriately reflects the inherent multiplicity of Japanese thought. One can see him as the consummate exemplification of the way of the samurai, in knowing the right time to die and having the courage to act accordingly. He can be reproached for vain egocentrism in his irresponsible disregard for his wife and the sacred institution of the family. One can argue that since he was beyond the peak of his powers, nothing of value was lost in his ending his life when he did, and that a great deal was gained, because all was not right in the state of Japan at the time, and his *seppuku* shocked at least some people into a realization of the crisis. We can say that he acted out of pure vanity, unable to bear the prospect of the disintegration of the body he had worked so hard to perfect. A Nietzschean could argue that he died at just the right time—or else that his obsession with the body was too literal and blinded him to the fact that old age would be incapable of destroying the magnificent body of work he had produced. Or one could say from the perspective of someone like Nishitani Keiji that his response to the problem of nihilism was too shallow: that the way in which he wanted to reassert the ancient Japanese spirit suggests that he failed to plumb the depths of the self sufficiently to reach a layer deeper than that of national identity.

Mishima came in for a great deal of criticism, both in Japan and abroad, for the right-wing views and support of the emperor system expressed in his later polemical essays and speeches. However, it is hard to take those views too seriously, in view of Mishima's quite apolitical stance during most of his career. And indeed they are peripheral to his main work—a body of literature, some of which is the finest in any modern language, and which embodies an important philosophy of existence that partakes genuinely of the best of the Japanese tradition.

Notes

1. An English translation of the story by Geoffrey W. Sargent can be found in *Yukio Mishima, Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1966). When not used in citations, Japanese names will be given Japanese style, with the family name first.


17. A modern version, as it were, of Noh drama is *Butoh*, a quintessentially Japanese form of theater involving music and dance, but which generally uses white-face, makeup, and body paint instead of masks. The only comprehensive treatment in English is Jean Viala, *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo, 1988). A fine collection of photographs can be found in Mark Holborn, et. al., *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (New York: Aperture, 1987). See also the videotape *Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis*.


20. This suggestion is based on Nishitani's discussion of the import of nihilism in the Japanese context in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.

21. *Ikiru* is available under that title both on videotape and on laser disc.

22. There is no evidence that Kurosawa was familiar with the writings of the European existential thinkers, but the film is uncannily reminiscent of the treatments of such themes as anxiety, nothingness, and death in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

23. if this output seems considerable, one should bear in mind that the Japanese film has always been one of the most prolific in the world. It is just that most of it has been, until fairly recently, for domestic consumption only.


25. A survey a few years ago estimated that as recently as 1966 fully fifty percent of marriages in urban areas in Japan were arranged (o-miai)—in rural
areas the figure was 63 percent—while nowadays the figure has dropped to around 25 percent.

26. After seeing Late Spring, Early Summer, and Tokyo Story the viewer is bound to see Hara Setsuko as the (good) daughter, Ryu Chishu as the (benevolent) father, and so on. Ozu’s apparently obsessive return to the same characters and themes in film after film has, of course, its counterparts in Western art—in Cézanne’s persistent return to the Montagne St. Victoire, for example.


28. The novels of the tetralogy, which—while they are perhaps not his best works—contain many interesting philosophical ideas, are: Spring Snow, Runaway Horses, The Temple of Dawn, and The Decay of the Angel. His greatest novels, and the most interesting philosophically, are (in my opinion) The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (1956) and The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea (1963).

29. Japanese Neo-Confucianism arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the major interest being in the work of the medieval Chinese philosophers Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-ming.