

Spiritual Arts and Education of “Less is More”: Japanese Perspectives, Western Possibilities

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Arts education, with its curriculum based on mainstream aesthetics, lays out the course of learning as centered on a series of art works. This series progresses from the elementary to the advanced, from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract. The language of arts education centers around universal aspects of art that transcend here—and—now propositions. One pedagogical and epistemological assumption behind this type of approach is “the more the better,” an idea that makes educators unconsciously seek, for example, more advanced techniques, more universal concepts, more comprehensive repertoire, more abstract knowledge, and more creative products.

London (1989) points out that art is typically perceived as refined manifestations of beauty, creativity, and originality. Three notions that hinder our attempts of engaging with life through art are that art is purely about beauty, that technique and a dexterous eye are necessary to be artists, and that there are certain canons of good art forms. Obsessed by these notions, we are “cut off from the authentic source of art, that is, firsthand conversation between the self and the world” (London, 2003, p. 76). Similarly, Palmer (1994) argues that mainstream aesthetic theories in music education have promoted, though perhaps not intentionally, an unbalanced inclination toward teaching “about” music and teaching something “cognitive and abstract” in music classrooms (p. 43). This line

of thinking leads to a critical view of arts education in which emphasis is placed on the acquisition of empty forms, abstract concepts, and transferable skills.

In this essay, I propose a type of education for the arts that follows the notion of “less is more.” The essence of such an approach includes an awareness and appreciation of the relationship between the individual and the world that can be attained through rather simple stimuli and media, such as a single tone of a bamboo flute or a simple brush stroke in calligraphy. In my work, several cases of spiritual transformation of Japanese artists reveal moments of single—pointed awareness in which the existential self is explored. Close examination of such moments suggests that deep learning can be gained through intentionally limiting one’s scope of expression.

In what follows, I provide a rough portrait of Japanese spiritual arts with emphasis on music to draw on their implications to education. My emphasis on esoteric aspects of the approach is not to deny the value of custom and cherishing in the Canadian context but rather to provide an alternative view of the arts which may help us imagine what we are missing in—and how we can venture beyond—our attempts of teaching and learning of the arts. Thus, rather than promoting cultural essentialism and dichotomizing Western and Eastern cultures, I explore the shared realm of cultural continuity experienced by Japanese artists in Western contexts. Although the differences between Eastern and Western traditions are fundamental, the traditions are not mutually exclusive; some aspects of general systems of the East and the West are, in fact, continuous (Takahashi, 2000). This statement is particularly true to contemporary modes of spiritual practice through the arts, which often result in cultural hybrids and multicultural understanding.

Spirituality from a Japanese Perspective

I start this discussion with a clarification of the term “spirituality” as distinguished from “religion,” as most thinkers in the field carefully and repeatedly have done in fear that the discussion of spirituality may violate rules on the teaching of religion in schools. *Spirituality* is still a controversial word for many people who associate the teaching of spirituality with any form of indoctrination or cultivation of religious feeling.

The critical point of differentiation between spirituality and religion is that the former is more a prior condition of experience and the latter is a path. A metaphor that Hay and Ney (1998) use is a drawing of a tree, with the roots labeled "spirituality" and the leaves "religion." Various theological traditions represent different paths by which people seek fulfillment and experience the deepest realities of life. But being religious is not necessarily a condition for being spiritual, and vice versa: Spirituality can be discussed without any reference to religion or God. This situation is true in societies like Japan, where people do not use the terms for "spirituality" and "religion" interchangeably.

Indeed, spirituality is incorporated in Japanese education. Although we do not find a clear manifestation of spirituality on the level of art and music education, the kind of belief that spiritual values are cultivated through the appreciation of and interaction with the natural world (Nakamura, 1997; Nishiwaki, 2004) is observed in certain phases of Japanese education. Two major curricular areas in which this belief is most clearly manifested are moral education and reading. A series of descriptions in the Japanese Curriculum Guidelines for Moral Education outlines three fundamental steps for moral cultivation: (1) appreciation of nature (including animals), (2) conscious awareness of beauty, and (3) the experience of awe (Nishiwaki, 2004). Japanese reading textbooks, compared to those in the United Kingdom and the United States, tend to include more stories involving anthropomorphized plants, insects, and animals that possess superior wisdom and moral values over human beings. Students are encouraged to learn from the virtues of those characters by reflecting on selfish behaviors of human beings and cultivating affection and respect toward nature (Usui, 2001). They are also encouraged to engage in "body-based" experience (*taiken*) of nature through gardening and animal-rearing in schools.

In a society where spirituality and religion are inextricably intertwined, however, the challenge of dealing with spirituality begins with opening up spaces in which spiritual conversations may occur without preaching religious beliefs or proselytizing. The discussion of spirituality in this essay is, in effect, a secular quest of everyday spirituality (Noddings, 2003; Van Ness, 1996)—the sort that can be sought after in the public domain without violating any rules on the teaching of religion. If spirituality entails the potential to promote a

realization of the most profound realities of one's world and a consciousness of the self in the fullest sense, educators should not devalue its potential in favor of objective, detached, public matters of teaching.

Experience with the arts is often seen as the only venue in the public domain in which the exploration of spirituality is accepted.¹ Oftentimes with this connection to the arts, the word *spirituality* is used in a more "innocuous" way (Hay & Nye, 1998, p. 8). The reason is, spirituality has been a significant part of artistic expression and experience; it serves to awaken people's higher levels of consciousness, reaffirms the covenants between humankind and nature, and connects people in different (or the same) times and places. When a curriculum revolves around existential themes of life, the arts are to be positioned at the center of educational inquiry.

The Arts and Here-and-Now Awareness

The majority of our thoughts are of abstractions that have no physical existence in our lives. Indeed, the major emphasis in education is more on the development of abstract thinking and analytical skills than on that of imagination and bodily understanding. The experience of the here-and-now is a heightened realization of the world that will contribute to spiritual cultivation; opportunities for here-and-now awareness are not provided much in most formal educational settings. An example is illustrated:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted. (Hay & Nye, 1998, pp. 61–62)

Here-and-now awareness generally takes form of aesthetic

experience, as it involves an intensified perception of the world. The traveler in Hay and Nye's example transcended the otherwise frightening conditions of his here-and-now experience and was able to enjoy the wild strawberry. Artists have long been trying to capture here-and-now moments of beauty, phenomena of suddenness and transience, and experiences of their own spiritual awakening.

Here-and-now awareness has been major part of a meditation practice in the East as well as the West: The practitioner learns to maintain a highly disciplined attention to the here-and-now by observing as carefully as possible either the act of breathing while sitting or the body's movements in walking. This "single-pointed" perception is of central importance in a certain form of Japanese music practices, which I described elsewhere the *aesthetics of a single sound* (Matsunobu, 2007). In the next section, I explain some related concepts that illuminate the idea of single—pointed perception.

Spiritual Traditions in Japanese Arts

The concept of *otodamaho* is a method of purifying the body and mind through the esoteric power of sound. A Japanese animist belief that was traditionally shared by people in ancient Japan explains that spiritual power resides in all sounds, including natural sound and spoken words (Makimoto, 2001; Shaner, 1989; Toyoda, 1985). Otodamaho suggests that spiritual practitioners become engaged in a meditative process through the appreciation and embodiment of natural sounds, situating themselves in nature to become part of the universe. Yoshisane Tomokiyo (1888–1952), elaborates on the theory of spiritual sound based on the concept of otodamaho as follows: "Nothing is more magical than the spirit of sound. All things in this universe are caused by the spirit of sound. All lives flow with the spirit of sound" (1972, p. 135). To grasp this perspective, Tomokiyo recommends that one should

simply listen to a "sound." Simply listen to a certain sound quietly and calm down. That's all.... You do not have to listen to music. Listen to a certain unchangeable sound: the sound of a waterfall, the murmur of a brook, [the] sound of rain, the sound of waves, anything you like. (Shimosako, 2002, pp. 549–550)

Throughout this process, practitioners strive to assimilate themselves to the sound, become part of the cosmos, and achieve a state of unity with all things. Spiritual cultivation through sound, it is believed, may be attained through otodamaho by “diluting” one’s self and blending the body and mind in the universe (Kamata, 1987).

The concept of otodamaho resembles, on the surface, that of “soundscape” developed and promoted by R. Murray Schafer (1977) and his followers in acoustic ecology at Simon Fraser University (e.g., Truax, 1978). But otodamaho essentially differs from the concept of soundscape in that the practitioner of otodamaho aims at attaining spiritual cultivation by merging him- or herself into a natural sound. Since soundscape is an attempt to portray and understand the sound environment and its relationship to humans, the activity itself tries to objectify the sound and put it into analysis. Although scholars have claimed the need for phenomenological approaches (e.g., Hiramatsu, 1997), and resulting research has revealed lived experience of the sound environment in a variety of settings (e.g., Torigoe, 1997; Feld, 2000), soundscape activities typically do not promote the dilution of the self and the blend of body and mind in the universe. In contrast, the practitioner of otodamaho focuses on the innate quality of a sound, rather than expressive or symbolic aspects of the sound, in order to become one with nature and free him— or herself from the anthropocentric mind. The chief goal of such practice is to achieve personal and spiritual maturity through the realization and embodiment of the world of sounding.² When engaged, people consciously or unconsciously enter a meditative process, often involving spiritual breathing, listening, and sound embodiment. When this engagement is experienced, the dualistic state of body and mind, subject and object, self and nature is obscured.

The second concept relevant to single-pointed perception is the notion of *ichion-jobutsu*, the attainment of enlightenment through perfecting a single tone. This idea has been traditionally sought after by practitioners in the Fuke sect of Japanese Zen who play the shakuhachi (a Japanese bamboo flute) for meditation practice, called *suizen* (blowing meditation). The chief goal of *ichion-jobutsu* is not to experience aesthetic pleasure but to achieve personal and spiritual maturity through the realization of the “ultimate tone” (called *tettei-on*). If the shakuhachi is used as an instrument of spiritual exercise, then aesthetic values are

reversed: A fine tone is not the goal of shakuhachi practice. "Mere musical pleasantries or technical brilliance in the absence of a concomitant spiritual cultivation is devalued as empty mechanical wizardry" (Peak, 1998, p. 364). The quest to produce an ultimate tone or the true sound of the bamboo assumes a function similar to that of Zen sitting. When playing the Fuke shakuhachi, the practitioner is to experience a meditative process through the sound, similar to the aims of otodamaho, by concentrating purely on the sound through spiritual breathing so as to become detached from the dichotomized state of body and mind, subject and object.

Spiritual exercise through the shakuhachi follows the principle of less is more: The ultimate aim of the practice is to strive toward spiritual maturity by sophisticating each tone, each moment, and each piece. That aim is part of the reason why shakuhachi players in the Fuke sect are specially trained to perform a limited number of musical pieces repeatedly. Fuyo Hisamatsu (trans., 1985) goes so far as to say that "39 pieces lie within 36 pieces. 36 pieces lie within 18 pieces. 18 pieces lie within 3 pieces. 3 pieces lie within one piece. One piece lies within no piece. [No piece lies within a spiritual breath.] A [spiritual] breath lies within emptiness and nothingness" (p. 44). In other words, the exercise is a quest of nothingness (Nakagawa, 2000; Nishitani, 1982)—a realization of epistemological indifference between subject and object, self and other, foreground and background, sound and silence. The phenomenal world is believed to be transient and thus perceived only through contemplating the here—and—now, not by way of analytical thinking. The idea of nothingness, or void (*sunyata*), in Eastern traditions has influenced the above—introduced Japanese spiritual arts and has promoted such approaches as ink drawing with blank space, calligraphy with a dry brush, and music with resonant silence.

Musically speaking, the moment of nothingness is highlighted by the concept of *ma*, the time between events—often a silence between phrases—in which a moment of here-and-now is brought about, a sense of focus and flow is renewed, and a breath in the middle of artful space is taken. "*Ma* describes neither space nor time, but the tension in the silence and in the space surrounding sounds and objects" (Galliano, 2002, p. 14). *Ma* is thus distinguished from a musical rest. Extrapolating from his own compositions, Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu (1995)

elaborates that if a silence functions simply as a rest in music, the sound would lose its strength within the functionalism of music's structure. For him, silence is so strong that it can stand alone: The powerful silence of *ma* generates a rich blank space in which a single tone is highlighted. In the moment of *ma*, the self is experienced as merged into the cosmos rather than expressed through the arts.

Of central importance to spiritual practices of arts is that they are tailored to facilitate single-pointed perception by promoting an intentional limit of the possible scope of expression. The idea is that we can attain deeper experiences through simple media such as a single tone. In this context, creativity and technique bear different meanings; together, though, they signify the capacity to reduce the hindrance for more direct experience of the world rather than the ability to create new objects or new ways of expression. This idea penetrates the Japanese tea ceremony, for instance. Tea masters discover the beauty of objects through the interactions with their utensils. They do not try to create new objects but seek to create artful minds, bodies, and spirits through heightened perceptions that bring about holistic, intuitive views of the objects (Yanagi, 1989). The arts as spiritual exercise also provides a different perspective on related cultural products, such as stage theories of artistic development that prioritize operational skills in conceptualizing artistic processes. Also, the notion and understanding of self-expression directly affect cultural products. In Eastern traditions, emphasis is more on the art of *impression* over the art of *expression*.

Lived Experiences of "Less Is More" Beyond Traditional Contexts

One may think that the abovementioned practices in the arts are too esoteric to be apprehended and appropriated by anyone outside of the tradition. One may also wonder to what extent their implications are transferable to more secular, everyday settings. Very simply, some aspects of the tradition may go beyond the original context, while others may not, depending on the surrounding nature of each event. Nevertheless, I argue here that the kind of spiritual moments described above can be achieved not only through Japanese spiritual exercises but also through daily practices of the arts in Western contexts. This is not to suggest that we can misappropriate cultural and spiritual traditions in

non-traditional contexts; rather, by looking at other traditions as mirrors, we should be able to reflect on our own value systems—a necessary process of multicultural understanding of self and others—which may lead to a more powerful and inclusive approach.

The following anecdotes illustrate examples of less-is-more approaches to the arts in Western contexts. These cases reveal a significant alignment between Western and Eastern approaches in light of art as single—pointed awareness and art as epiphany through a limited scope of expression.

First, let me elaborate on my own piano practice and meditative experience through a single—pointed approach. Long before I came to learn about the shakuhachi and Japanese spiritual music, I received my first musical training in Japan through Western classical piano. During my piano practices, I often experienced a type of special moment that was, in part, made possible by a method book developed by Anna Hirzel—Langenhan for the enhancement of sensitivity and finger dexterity. Putting my fingers on the black keys (B^b, D^b, E^b, G^b, A^b) and my palm on the white keys, I pushed each key downward many times, imagining a variety of sounds and scenes that I hoped to depict, for example: a moment when the afternoon breeze on a cool, sunny spring day suddenly stops, and I see a bamboo leaf flit down to a small pool, leaving a gentle, transparent ripple quietly spreading out as the leaf comes to rest on the surface of the water. I tried many times until the sound of the piano matched my image of the moment, sometimes spending all day long exercising all fingers until my spirit soared.³

In retrospect, the essence of my piano practice was not so different from the shakuhachi training for *ichion—jobutsu* and other types of spiritual practices for single—pointed awareness. Practicing the piano was a way of exploring the world of sounding that heightened my perception of the mind—body relationship. By evoking the imagination, I tried to find meanings of my enduring piano practice and sought a mindful fulfillment of my own spirit. Since I was a student in Western classical music, wherein the value of structure typically prevails over that of each tone my theory teacher wondered why I wanted to spend so much time on the elaboration of single tones. Thinking back, I was trying to find the depth of music in a single tone rather than in a highly developed melodic line, complicated rhythms and harmony, and all

other features interwoven in intricate musical structures. Each refined tone led me to a mindful satisfaction. There was no whole–part dualism but a unified sounding.

A similar example to my musical experience is portrayed in Atsuhiko Yoshida’s experience in calligraphy (Yoshida, 2005). Joining a course in calligraphy at the Rudolf Steiner Center in Toronto, he was drawing the Japanese character for river, *kawa*, which is made with three vertical lines and thus written with three strokes: 川. When he finished the third stroke, he recognized a strong feeling arising through his palm, connecting the feeling with his earlier experience of canoeing. Keeping the fresh memory of beautiful scenery, he continued drawing the character, sometimes with his eyes closed. Soon, he came to feel as if the character was alive and flowing in front of him. He describes this experience as follows: “I encountered the vital life of the *Kawa* character in this way. Since that [*sic*], the experience of writing *Kawa* has become totally different for me. The character is no longer an object outside myself, it is something living within” (p. 133). A loving connection was born between himself and the world; the connection was made possible through the simple character. With his imagination, he enabled himself to transform the experience of writing a single character. Embodying the energy of the earth, he felt the character unfolding its life and soul and became connected with the people who have lived with and written the character throughout history.

Another portrayal of less-is-more experience through piano is provided by Finland-based Japanese pianist Izumi Tateno, who suffered from a cerebral anemia and the loss of command of the right side of his body after a 40-year professional career as a pianist. Feeling desperate and woeful, he could not help but to wish that his right hand would wake up again someday. After a two-year resistance of being compromised by “elementary” pieces, he happened to encounter a piece for a left-hand pianist composed by Franck Bridge. He describes his worldview-changing experience through the piece:

In the moment I produced the sounds with my left hand, a mighty ocean spread out in my mind. A surge like a flyaway glacier came out of my deepest heart. Through the hand extended to the piano, the world and I became one. The sound smells, blossoms, flows, bursts,

and completes itself as a growing entity of perfection. What a pleasure and exhilaration.... It does not matter how many arms are available when it comes to music performance. With only one key, I can convey full-blown music, and the flower comes into full bloom. (Tateno, 2005, pp. 163–164)

It was after this experience that he realized music becomes much fresher and richer with fewer notes. He states that "the essence of music stands up through these bare, pure sounds that cannot be curtailed any further" (p. 164). Playing with only one hand is not any more limiting than playing with two hands. "Through the five fingers, my entire body, and my whole existence, I become at one with the audience and the world" (p. 167). Because it requires much more sophistication than performing with two hands, he claims that this view should not be limited only to handicapped pianists but available for all.

The idea of "less is more" is clearly exemplified by these people—some with professional backgrounds, others without. They were awakened when they happened to be put under circumstances in which they were required to abandon the obsession of technical demand and accuracy of expression. In fact, some teachers in meditation and art making intentionally set up a context in which students are required to draw quickly, so as not to have time to bring up critical reflection on their own works. A person who attended a workshop on art making and meditation remarked, "using the left hand for right-handed people was freeing the judgmental element and made it possible to explore more" (Nozawa, 2005, p. 230). This observation explains the essence of Tateno's experience, which makes a case that our taken-for-granted assumption of the-more-the-better sometimes hinders our encounter with music in the deepest sense. His musical epiphany was brought about when he was released from his socialization and enculturation in the classical music world through the less-is-more approach. In a similar way, Yoshida's vignette suggests that art facilitates an embodiment of the earth's energy and is brought out by a simple media. One important lesson is that non-specialists and beginners like Yoshida may achieve the depth of calligraphy through a simple medium if it is approached in a more aesthetic and engaging way with the fundamental unity of life.

These cases may open up a new way to look at the practice of arts from a reversed standpoint that is not incorporated in the traditional curriculum. Although the spiritual moment cannot so easily be prepared for and anticipated in formal settings, we can pay more attention to what hinders us in order to promote deep experiences and engagements with the arts.

Implications

The spiritual traditions of Japanese arts challenge our thinking. The Japanese pedagogical vision of less is more is not simply a way of making learning easier and more accessible. Nor is it only for people at an elementary stage of learning. It involves a different epistemological assumption: The goal is not to accumulate knowledge or seek a higher level of technical and artistic achievement but to deepen one's experience for the artful fulfillment of mind, body, and spirit. Results are measured not by external products but by meanings of the actions to each individual. Emphasis in education is put on processes over products.

The principle of less is more drawn from the cases in this paper ultimately questions the means and end balance in arts education. The message is that we can achieve the true end by reducing the scope of means. The end should be the enhancement of life; and the mastery of skills and connoisseurship should be the means. Aristotle posits in *Nicomachean Ethics* that a good action has itself as its own end. Such action is so gratifying that people are willing to do so for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This is essentially the question Noddings (2003) was raising when she said:

Why do we so often defeat our own purposes by choosing means that are in clear contradiction to our aims? If, for example, we teach poetry in the hope that it will be a lifelong source of wisdom and delight, why do we bore students with endless analysis and an emphasis on technical vocabulary? Why do we tell children to do their best and then give them low grades when their best is not as good as that of others? Why, for that matter, do we give grades at all? (p. 2)

From this viewpoint, we can further question related issues of technique,

creativity, and expression that haunt educators. Why do we concern ourselves with the acquisition of abstract concepts and transferable skills? Why are we obsessed by standardized curricula and criteria—based evaluation? Why do we discourage a violin student who wants to practice the same piece of music all year long just because she does not proceed to the next piece? One possible approach to such problems is to rethink the traditional approaches to the arts from the perspectives introduced in this essay as well as other precedent works (Miller, 1988, 2000; Nozawa, 2005) and reduce the amount material covered in the curriculum.

The issue in question is not strange to us. We are here dealing with the classic theme: Depth of learning prevails over coverage of contents. The coalition for Essential Schools, for example, exemplifies the dictum of less—is—more and depth over coverage (Sizer, 1992, 1996). Sizer's curricular view is not simply to limit the scope of learning in order to make it easier but to focus more on existential themes for individuals. The idea behind his approach is that learning becomes richer and deeper when the inquiry becomes personal and spiritual, and the result will be greater because existential themes are incorporated into the inquiry. A similar assertion is provided by Howard Gardner (1999), who investigated the possibility of existential intelligence as part of significant human ability. Gardner claims that true understanding requires depth of inquiry rather than a collection of disembodied information or an array of multidisciplinary entry approaches (Gardner, 1991, 1994). These scholars question if we should legitimate our attempts of surfacing enormous quantities of content in our curricula in favor of broad coverage of contents.

Perhaps further discussion will begin by reflecting on already—existing ideas in the West, including those of Theodore Sizer, John Dewey, and Rudolf Steiner, which are amicable to Eastern thought, in order to unveil the meanings of Japanese arts in Western contexts.

Notes

¹Some observe that aesthetics is a modern rendition of spirituality. For example, British music educationist June Boyce-Tillman (2000, 2004) observes that music is the last remaining ubiquitous spirituality in many secularized Western cultures. Music has become the highest expression of human achievement, and notions of the aesthetic have replaced God.

²Although otodamaho and soundscape are essentially different in theory, they are practically similar. It may be for this reason that significant growth and interest in soundscape activities are occurring in Japan. The growth and interest are led by accumulated studies on theory and practice of soundscape, something of a rare occurrence in places outside of Japan (Torigoe, 1997; see articles in Saundosukepu: *Gendai no Esupuri*).

³ Several people shared with me that similar exercises have been practiced by professional pianists including, for example, Sviatoslav Richter (1915–1997), who often spent a certain amount of time on the stage before his recital to sensitize his fingers and explore the world of sounding.

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