

## **Subjectivity of ‘Mu-shin’ (No-mind-ness): Zen Philosophy as interpreted by Toshihiko Izutsu**

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we consider whether there is any subjectivity in the state of ‘Mu-shin (No-mindness)’. Dr. Toshihiko Izutsu, a Japanese philosopher, has tried to answer this question with the example of a master musician absorbed in playing his harp. The master musician is so absorbed in playing and so completely one with the music itself, that he is no longer conscious of his fingers or of the instrument. But he is not ‘unconscious’, for he is conscious of himself as identified with the music. Izutsu explained that ‘Paradoxical as it may sound, he is so fully conscious of himself as identified with music that he is not ‘conscious’ of his act of playing in any ordinary sense of the word.’ Izutsu called this particular phase of ‘awareness of self in full identification with music’ ‘Mu-shin teki Syutaisei (the subjectivity of Mu-shin)’. We may think of this particular phase as that which is prior to the subject-object bifurcation. However, Izutsu taught us that Zen-text has expressed this phase in four different ways, and it is these four types of ‘Mu-shin’ expression that we consider here.

**Keywords:** Mushin (No-mind-ness), D.T.Suzuki, T.Izutsu, Zen Philosophy, Concreent nature

## **1. The Term 'Mu-Shin'—Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki and Toshihiko Izutsu**

This paper looks at the subjectivity of 'Mu-shin' or 'No-mind-ness.' Mu-shin is a commonly understood term for Japanese, even if it defies simple definition. It might be used, for example, by a musician who 'gets lost' in his composition. The term carries with it the implication of self-forgetfulness, of sublimity, of convergence with a particular endeavor. It is in this state of 'No-mind-ness' that the object (such as an instrument or a painting) with which one interacts reveals its own hidden essence, and that allows for the achievement of perfect harmony.

The etymology of 'Mu-shin' or 'No-mind-ness', however, has proven remarkably elusive. While the term can be found in Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist texts, as well as in indigenous Japanese classical literature (the literature not derived from Chinese sources), the meaning of the term clearly varies according to the context. That is to say, the term has to a large extent avoided standardization. For the sake of this paper, I will confine reference of the term 'Mu-shin' to Zen Buddhism, particularly as expounded by preeminent Japanese philosopher Toshihiko Izutsu.

At the Eranos Conference, Izutsu delivered lectures about the Oriental classics. His first lecture in 1969 was about the term 'Mu-shin', which succeeded the famous lecture by Zen scholar Daisetsu Suzuki. In the Japanese paper entitled *Field Structure of Zen Consciousness*, Izutsu wrote the following:

Coincidentally, some years prior to my participation at Eranos, the renown Zen scholar Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki lectured there on Zen for two consecutive years. Apparently, his lecture greatly impressed the audience and, as a result, interest in Zen spread quickly. Nonetheless, it seems that for the most part, Dr. Suzuki's listeners were so absorbed in his talk that they failed to grasp the content. They could sense that something deep and profound was being spoken, but they were unable to put their finger on it (Izutsu, 1988, p.340).

In other words, Izutsu's talk was an attempt to clarify the Zen thought of Suzuki. The discussion began with a careful consideration of one of Suzuki's key terms which is 'Mu-shin' (*wu hsin* in Chinese) or 'No-mind-ness'.

The question of interest for us is 'What sort of examples did Izutsu employ to communicate his message on Zen thought to a scholarly audience which was clearly ill at ease with the expression or concept of "No mind"?'

While the gist of the English version (Izutsu, 2008b) and Japanese version (Izutsu, 1988) of Izutsu's commentary coincide, there are some noteworthy differences in their finer details. In particular, the English version includes elementary explanations which are absent or greatly abbreviated in the Japanese version. In other words, Izutsu thought that the explanation which was designed to assist western intellectuals to comprehend the nuances of Zen thought through utilization of everyday experiences was deemed redundant for its Japanese readers.

However, these elementary explanations are extremely important for *anyone*—Western or otherwise—who is unfamiliar with the intricacies of Zen thought.

## **2. Master musician—'No-mind-ness' as a psychological state**

### **2.1.**

Izutsu reminds us that it is important not to mistake 'No-mind-ness' for absent mindedness or mental/soulful lethargy. No-mind-ness is not a state in which one loses one's mental capacities. Nor is it a state of losing perception or of mental torpor, or even of ecstasy. In the English text, intensification of No-mind-ness is described as 'The actualization of the No-mind-ness' (Izutsu, 2008b, p.90) and is explained as a particular psychological state.

The practice of beginning the talk with a psychological explanation is a trait adopted from Suzuki. From the standpoint of Izutsu's own philosophy of Zen, there is no necessity to commence with such a

psychological explanation. On the contrary, it would have been much more natural for Izutsu to begin his talk with either a linguistic explanation or an ontological one, but as his intent was to faithfully explicate the thought of Suzuki, which was premised on a psychological understanding of No-mind-ness, Izutsu, he judiciously preserved the psychological perspective of Suzuki and expounds on No-mind-ness as one particular psychological state.

What kind of psychological state is that of No-mind-ness? Izutsu said that it is ‘the highest point of tension’ (Izutsu, 2008b,p.89), or that it works with utmost intensity and lucidity. Therefore, No-mind-ness is not synonymous with unconsciousness. Perhaps you have heard accomplished artists or athletes describe an amazing performance by reflecting that ‘the brush just seemed to move on its own accord’ or ‘I was in the zone and simply flowed with it’. They do not describe their experience as a state of unconsciousness but rather as something of an altered, heightened state, a sense of ease and oneness with their craft. This, I believe, is what Izutsu alludes to when he says that the performer is in the state of utmost intensity and lucidity.

## 2.2.

Izutsu studied this state in a master harp player. When the virtuoso plays, he describes the situation as one in which the harp plays itself, just as it beckons to be played by its very nature. There is no perceived effort on the part of the musician, but rather a harmonious engagement with that which is played. There is neither player nor played, musician or instrument. This harmony, or supreme confluence of ‘subject’ and ‘object’, if you will, is made possible by the state of No-mind-ness.

On this note, Izutsu comments, ‘The aesthetic tension of his mind runs so high throughout his whole being that he himself is the music he is playing’ (Izutsu, 2008b,p.90). The virtuoso *becomes* the music, he does not *play* the music. In the same way, the music *becomes* the master musician. The two have become one.

Izutsu goes on to say, ‘Paradoxical as it may sound, the virtuoso is so fully conscious of himself as identified with the music that he is no longer conscious of his act of playing in any ordinary sense of the word’ (Izutsu,2008b p.90). The musician has not forgotten himself. On the contrary, he has acquired a new consciousness of himself in concert with the music.

When a musician resides in the consciousness of *playing* an instrument, then the musician and the instrument remain separate and distinct fields of consciousness. Similarly, when the proper pitch or tonality is not achieved, a distinction arises between that of *the musician with his disappointment* and that of *the instrument which failed to yield the right tone*. Likewise, an excessive amount of conscious effort also results in the dichotomized ‘self’ and ‘instrument’ paradigm. It is precisely this dichotomization which engenders the self-consciousness of the musician.

Virtuosos, however, do not experience this dichotomization that results from conscious striving. That is because they have completely entered the music and become one with it. The virtuoso is neither separate nor distinct from his instrument. The virtuoso is the music. That is not to say that the virtuoso becomes unconscious but rather that he loses his self-consciousness and experiences an intense awareness of union with his instrument.

Let us consider here what the grammatical subject is of the verb ‘to be conscious’. That subject in this case is not the ‘ordinary self’. It is never the self distinguished from the music. The self considered here is the self that has coalesced into the amalgamated subject of ‘self-music’, and for that reason the action (to be conscious) executed by the subject (‘self-music’) also is entirely different to the ordinary subject of conscious activity.

What, then, shall we term this state of consciousness which is neither the consciousness governed by ordinary self nor unconsciousness? Izutsu came up with the term ‘supra-consciousness’ in the English version of his text. As you know, *supra* is the Latin prefix meaning ‘above, over’. It can be contrasted, therefore, with pre (semi) consciousness and subconscious. Notably, however, this term is absent in the Japanese version of the text. As the term was never further developed in his later work, it seems appropriate to view it as a provisional term coined for that specific occasion.

In point of fact, this metaphorical use of *supra* does overlap with the perspective which envelops from above the field (place) that is mentioned in the latter half of Izutsu's treatise under the heading Field Structure of Zen Consciousness.

### 2.3.

To reiterate, the virtuoso has become one with the music in the state of No-mind-ness. That 'self which has attained oneness with the music' Izutsu calls 'No-mind-ness subjectivity' and appears only in the Japanese version of the text.

Kitaro Nishida taught that one should think and act 'after becoming the object'. That is the same concept Izutsu wishes to express by describing a musician becoming one with his instrument. That is the 'No-mind-ness subjectivity' attained through unification with the music.

It is not the case, however, that the virtuoso has lost or forgotten 'self'. It is, rather, that his self has experienced a perfect confluence with the music. That state of confluence creates a new consciousness which is neither the ordinary, everyday ego-based consciousness nor unconsciousness. It is a special conscious state which Izutsu called 'supra-consciousness'.

Interestingly, Izutsu was careful to identify this example of master musician as 'No-mind-ness of Art' and distinguishes it from 'No-mind-ness of Zen'. The conscious state achieved by virtuosos in their particular art form is a unique event. It is an event that obtains through the perfection of the art and is experienced as something akin to a special dispensation of grace. Obviously, that is not a state that is pursued in everyday life. This 'No-mind-ness of Art' is not a state that seeks perpetuation in the ordinary, daily consciousness of the virtuoso.

In contrast, Zen does seek to attain the state of 'No-mind-ness' in ordinary, daily consciousness. It is no longer a special event. It strives to make 'No-mind-ness' an abiding state of consciousness in which every aspect of daily life is experienced. Zen aims at attaining that same state of 'No-mind-ness' which the virtuoso experiences and to have it reside naturally and with ease in the daily life of the practitioner.

Here, too, we must resort to the use of paradox. While it is common wisdom to understand the experience of 'No-mind-ness of Art' as a unique event, it is not common wisdom to understand the experience of 'No-mind-ness of Zen'. As this would presume that the unique, the momentary, the ephemeral can in fact become the commonplace, the constant, the abiding. In this regard, 'No-mind-ness of Art', though in a sense mystical and arcane, can nonetheless be understood through common conception. 'No-mind-ness of Zen', on the other hand, transcends these common boundaries.

## 3. 'Concurrent nature' and the three stages of the Zen masters' teachings

We have already discussed how at the height of consciousness, the virtuoso attains a special state we have called 'No-mind-ness'. We have also established that this state is qualitatively different to the virtuoso's ordinary, everyday consciousness, as well as that this state is unequivocally not the same as unconsciousness. The virtuoso is conscious of himself as identified with the music. At peak, his consciousness has melded with the music, but it has not been obliterated or eradicated. On the one hand, he can no longer be said to possess ordinary consciousness, that consciousness which is undergirded by the dualistic ego; but on the other hand, a new consciousness, which forms an element of the new hybrid 'player-played' consciousness, is born. This expresses the unique 'concurrent nature'.

### 3.1.

Izutsu explained this double nature through use of Zen texts. He often quoted the famous sayings of Master Ch'ing Yuan. Zen Master Ch'ing Yuan Wei Hsin (*Seigen Ishin* in Japanese) was a prominent teacher in the Sung era (11<sup>th</sup> c.).

Thirty years ago, before this aged monk got into Zen training, I used to see a mountain as a mountain and a river as a river. Thereafter I had the chance to meet enlightened masters and,

under their guidance, I could attain enlightenment to some extent. At this stage, when I saw a mountain, lo! It was not a mountain. When I saw a river, lo! It was not a river.

But in these days, I have settled down to a position of final tranquility. As I used to do in my first years, I now see a mountain just as a mountain and a river just as a river (Izutsu, 2008a, p.234).

### 3.2.

Here we see the Zen world view expressed in three stages.

(1) The initial stage corresponds to the experience of an ordinary person. A mountain and a river are sharply distinguished from one another as two distinct entities. Moreover, Izutsu pointed out that the knower and the known are also sharply distinguished from one another as two separate entities: the perceiving 'I' (Subject) and the perceived thing (Object). A mountain, for example, is seen by the perceiving 'I' as an objective thing called 'mountain'.

(2) At the middle stage, the so-called 'objective' world is deprived of its ontological solidity. There is no boundary between a mountain and a river. There is no mountain which is sharply distinguished from other entities, but there is Non-mountain which, by itself, has no boundary (later we will call this boundary 'svabhava' according to the Buddhist tradition).

Moreover, Izutsu pointed out that at this stage the very expression 'I see a mountain' is strictly a false statement, for there is neither the 'I' which sees nor the mountain which is seen. The perceiving 'I' has been deprived of its ontological solidity. There is no boundary between the perceiving 'I' (Subject) and the mountain (Object). At this middle stage, the perceiving mind is no more a mind by itself. It is recognizable only as a 'No-mind-ness' (we call this phase of No-mind-ness 'No-mind-ness ①' in order to distinguish it from another phase of No-mind-ness).

From the ontological viewpoint, if there is anything here at the no-boundary-state, it must be the undivided Something. Izutsu explained that it is the absolutely undivided awareness of Something eternally illuminating itself as the whole universe. In such a state did the Zen master declare that a mountain is not a mountain: the mountain is recognizable only as a 'no-mountain'.

(3) At the final stage, a stage of infinite freedom and tranquility, the Zen master saw a mountain *just* as a mountain, and a river *just* as a river. What does this 'just' mean? Izutsu explained it from the ontological viewpoint at first, saying that the undivided Something divides itself into Subject and Object in the very midst of the original oneness, the latter being kept intact despite the apparent Subject-Object bifurcation. The result is that the Subject and the Object (the 'I' and the mountain) are separated from one another, and merged into one another. The separation and merging are one and the same act of the originally undivided Something.

From the epistemological viewpoint, we may say, at the very moment that the 'I' came out of the Something, 'I' merged into a mountain and became one. The 'I' of Zen is not yet a solid subject which has a rigid boundary against the objective world. Following the example of the virtuoso, we may call this event 'the Zen master as identified with the mountain'. The master, however, was never unconscious. Rather, he was so fully conscious of himself as identified with the mountain that he was no longer 'conscious' of the mountain in any ordinary sense of the word.

The separation and merging is one and the same event. We understand this event as a particular 'concurrent nature'. This is the state of No-mind-ness②.

### 3.3.

Let us now examine the final stage and investigate the particulars of this 'concurrent nature'.

At the final stage, a perceived separation has come back between the mountain and the river. Izutsu pointed out, however, that what has returned is not 'the permanently fixed essence'. In other words, the articulations responsible for creating this perceived separation have returned, but the ontological solidity or essence has not moved. In the Buddhist tradition, this essence is known as 'Own Nature' (*Ji-shyoh* in Japanese, *svabhava* in Sanskrit).

A Zen master at the final stage who has no 'Own Nature' conceives a mountain and a river without their own respective 'Own Natures'; that is, without their own distinct essence, substance or

ontological solidity. Such a master is still able to sharply distinguish between forms, but he is not bound by their individual essence (their self-subsistence). He sees every worldly form distinctly but without the form's dichotomizing 'Own Nature'. The Buddhist tradition recognizes this ideal stage of 'No-own-nature' (*Mu-ji-shoh* in Japanese and *nihsvabhava* in Sanskrit) as the acme of enlightenment.

The subjectivity of No-mind-ness is understood by the idea of 'No-own-nature', which notably lacks any substantial nature or ontological solidity. 'Concurrent nature' then, is a psychological interpretation of this state of 'No-own-nature'. Izutsu has explained this final stage as 'bifocal eyes' (ein Doppelfokus-Auge). He said the Zen master who has once experienced 'Nothing-ness' (Non-articulation/stage 2) can never forget the absolute phase. When he began to experience the separated phase, he perceived the separated world overlapping with the absolute Nothing-ness. The bifocal eyes of the Zen master have a particular double nature composed of the articulation phase and the Non-articulation phase.

As mentioned earlier, Izutsu conveyed this event from the ontological point of view: the undivided Something divides itself into Subject and Object in the very midst of the original oneness. Again, the latter retains its integrity despite the apparent demotion to its status of object. The subjectivity of No-mind-ness is understood by the idea of a particular 'concurrent nature' which is composed of the Articulation and the Non-articulation.

#### **4. On the state prior to Subject-Object bifurcation**

##### **4.1.**

Thus far, we have discussed No-mind-ness① and No-mind-ness②. To recap, No-mind-ness① is the stage of No-separation, Non-articulation. No-mind-ness② is the stage of 'concurrent nature.' I will now attempt to clarify the murky definitions above.

Izutsu emphasized that No-mind-ness should not be understood only as that state of the exclusion of Subject ('I') and Object (instrument); in other words, the 'neither I nor instrument' is only one phase of the state of No-mind-ness. If No-mind-ness were to be understood only as a state of 'neither I nor the instrument', then the state of 'I identified with music' would be insufficient. 'I' should be totally negated into the No-boundary.

Izutsu refuted this understanding. No-mind-ness can be experienced in the state of 'neither I nor instrument' as well as in the state of 'I identified with music'. There is nothing separating these two states which would necessitate a choice. This 'I' does not refer to the ordinary ego, and the 'I identified with music' should be understood in a particular state of 'concurrent nature'.

It is possible to experience the No-mind-ness in the state in which 'the music plays itself.' In this state, there is no 'I' but only instrument. It is not the musician playing the instrument, but it is the instrument both being played and playing itself. Izutsu emphasized this point in order to preclude any misunderstanding of No-mind-ness as regards the notion that it might include a shutting off of all mental faculties. It does not. No-mind-ness is experienced in the state of 'I identified with music' as well as in the state of 'music playing itself'.

Moreover, in Zen texts, No-mind-ness is expressed in the statement 'I-play-the-instrument'. The state of 'neither I nor instrument' can be assumed in the statement 'I-play-the-instrument', which appears to mirror the quite familiar and straightforward expression. Of course, we understand here that the 'I' of this statement is a particular subjectivity merging with the instrument, and the instrument is also the particular object which merges with the playing 'I'.

##### **4.2.**

In order to investigate these complicated phenomena, Izutsu presented the traditional framework from the Zen text *Four Standards of Lin Chi*.

Historically, in the Lin Chi School, 'Four Standards' means four basic standards by which a Zen master might measure the degree of perfection of his disciples. However, Izutsu believed that Lin Chi's intention was primarily to establish theoretically the four principal forms which the same Field of No-mind-ness can assume, and thereby elucidate the dynamic structure of the Field. In other words,

Izutsu interpreted this 'Four Standards' not as the degree of perfection but as the multiple expressions of the whole energy of the Field of No-mind-ness.

In this context, Izutsu used the particular term 'the Field,' which means the whole field including subject and object, mind and world, interior and exterior, etc.

Regarding the case of the virtuoso, it is possible to identify the following four standards:

1. Only the instrument,
2. Only the 'I' (the player),
3. The instrument and the 'I' are both negated,
4. The instrument and the 'I' retain their integrity.

The virtuoso experiences the No-mind-ness in these four ways. In the state of No-mind-ness, none of these four standards is superior or inferior to the others, and each can be experienced with the equal effect (see diagram).

In standard no.1, the instrument plays itself; it is not 'I' who play the music. 'I' is extinguished into the music. Zen masters said about this phase that 'the man is snatched away, while the environment is left intact'. 「奪人不奪境 (だつにん、ふだつきょう)」 The subject is totally negated. Only the object is left and represents the whole energy of the Field of the No-mind-ness. The instrument plays itself.

In standard no.2, only the 'I' exists, and the instrument is totally negated. Only the subject is left and it represents the whole energy of the Field of the No-mind-ness. The 'I' of this phase is not only 'myself identified with music', but 'I' who represent the whole energy of the Field. Zen masters said about this phase that 'the environment is snatched away, while the man is left intact'. 「奪境不奪人 (だつきょう、ふだつにん)」

The whole world is nothing other than 'I'. I alone, nothing else, nobody else. However, this 'I' is not an ordinary ego. The 'I' is a subjective concretization of the whole energy of the Field.

Standard no.3, this is the phase of both the player and the instrument negated. There is in this state neither the instrument nor the 'I'. Zen masters said this phase is that in which 'the man and the environment are both snatched away'. 「人境俱奪 (にんきょう、ぐ、だつ)」

Both subject and object disappear from the surface of the Field. This is a state about which Zen says; 'There is in the original state of Reality absolutely nothing whatsoever'. We may understand the No-mind-ness① as this state.

Standard no.4, this is the phase where subject and object come back. Zen masters said this phase is that in which 'the man and the environment are both left intact'. 「人境俱不奪 (にんきょう、ぐ、ふだつ)」

It is the state of 'I-play-the-instrument' which seems superficially the same as our familiar world of ordinary experience. The 'I' and the instrument have once lost themselves into the Nothingness (No-boundary and Non-articulation), and now returns to life again in a particular freshness.

#### 4.3.

We may now understand the No-mind-ness② as the phase of 1, 2, and 4. The phase of 3 corresponds to the No-mind-ness①. It is important to confirm that No-mind-ness① and ② have the same capacity to represent the whole energy of the Field of the No-mind-ness. Izutsu emphasized over and over again that each one of the four states is in itself a form of the total actualization of the Field. Izutsu wrote the following:

The Field is of such a mobile and delicately flexible nature that if emphasis is laid on the "subjective" side, the whole thing turns into the Subject, while if on the contrary emphasis is laid on the "objective" side, the whole thing turns into the Object. Similarly, if nothing is seen, there is neither Subject nor Object. But if the emphasis is evenly diffused all over the Field, there is the Subject, there is the Object, and the world is seen as a vast, limitless Unity of a multiplicity of separate things. And whichever of these outer forms it may assume, the Field always remains in its original state (Izutsu, 2008b, p.131).

Izutsu set out his idea perfectly. There is no need for further conclusion.

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**Diagram 'Four Standards' of Lin Chi 臨濟「四料筒」**

The virtuoso experiences the No-mind-ness in four ways. In the state of No-mind-ness, none of these four standards is superior or inferior to the others, and each can be experienced with the equal effect.

4. 我也有り、楽器もある（わたしが、ハーブを、弾く）  
'I-play-the-instrument'  
人境俱不奪 にんきょうぐふだつ  
'the man and the environment are both left intact'.

1. 楽器のみ（楽器が自ら奏でる）  
It is only the instrument.  
The instrument plays itself.  
It is not 'I' who plays the music.  
奪人不奪境 だつにんふだつきょう  
'the man is snatched away,  
while the environment is left intact'.

2. 我のみ（音楽と一体となった自分）  
It is only the 'I'.  
The instrument is totally negated.  
奪境不奪人 だつきょうふだつにん  
'the environment is snatched away,  
while the man is left intact'.

3. 我もなく楽器もなく（我も楽器も共にない）  
人境俱奪 にんきょうぐだつ  
It is the phase of both negated.  
neither the instrument nor the 'I'.  
'the man and the environment are both snatched away'

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