

A Conversation with Nishida: The Letter

Nishida is once again standing by the window, looking out.

“Waiting again for the future?” I jibe.

“No. The postman,” he responds dryly, apparently ignoring my tease.

“The postman, who always rings—”

“Twice.” Nishida stops me with his interjection. “No, he does not ring at all. Does not even knock to alert us to his delivery. And that is why I watch for him by the window.”

“Expecting something important, are you?” I ask.

“Important, yes,” he responds. “An acquaintance from many years ago sends me a question, and I respond with a question that illuminates his first query. He then responds with a further illuminating question, and so on it goes, over the years. Today is the appointed day for his next question to arrive, and I am anxious to receive it.”

“Well, how long has it been?” I ask.

“Five years.”

“You’ve been doing this back and forth for five years?! I can’t believe it,” I exclaim.

“If you cannot believe that we have been corresponding in questions for five years, then you will not believe what next I will tell you,” replies Nishida, calmly.

“Okay,” I begin. “I’ll bite. What won’t I believe?”

“That we have not yet answered the first question. We have explored its context, its ground, the figures that comprise its many aspects of what is noticeable about the question, and even the domains in which meaning can be made of the question. In fact, I am not quite sure whether I can recall the precise question without returning to the original letter.”

“*Sensei*, do you mean to tell me that you have spent five years exploring the many issues of a question with your friend, and cannot recall what brought you to the issue in the first place?”

“The discovery of knowledge is often that way,” explains Nishida. “How you arrive at a path of inquiry is important, I agree, but what you learn by following the path of inquiry, wherever it might lead you, is of far greater concern. So we continue to ask, to query, to seek, to invite more questions. The

day we are unable to ask another question is the end of knowledge, and I, for one, am too young to see that end.”

The doorbell rings. Then a knock. I look out the window and see the familiar uniform, and in the hand at the end of the blue sleeve, a letter. Nishida and I look at each other—he, more surprised than I at the announcement of the postman’s arrival.

“You see,” he says. “There is never an end to new experience and knowledge.”