

A Conversation With Nishida: The Mountain

“Why do you climb the mountain?” he asks.

“Because it’s there?” I reply.

“Not so good a joke, but an acceptable answer for some.

But why do you climb the mountain?” he insists.

I ponder that simple question. Why *do* I climb the mountain? We sit in silence, meeting one another in a *place of mutual awareness*, he more confident than I that the key to insight is on that metaphorical mountain. Of course!

“Because...” I begin, “because the key to insight resides with the mountain.” I am careful to be as non-specific as befits a student of his particular brand of philosophy. I continue: “There are insights to be found at the base of the mountain and among the surrounding foothills. There are insights scattered along the way that leads from the well-explored flatlands to the slope that I intend to scale. There are insights at the summit, perhaps the best view of the overall insights to be seen.”

“And?” He waits, with that slight smile crossing his face indicating that I am indeed on the right path. The right path!

“And there are insights that can be discovered on the mountain path, on the journey up the mountain itself.”

He frowns. “What of the journey downward? Are there no insights on that path? Is it the same path up as it is down, even if there seems to be but one path?”

Now it’s my turn to frown. Just as you can never step twice into the same river, it’s not the same path up as it is down. I missed that one, and it is so obvious—in retrospect. “No, *sensei*. The path downward is a different path from the one leading upward. Each direction provides its own insight.”

“If your intent is to explore the paths, then you are right. The direction matters. If, however, your intention is to explore the mountain, why are you distracting yourself with the path?”

Busted! Never, ever try to outsmart your *sensei*.

“Why do you climb the mountain?” he asks again, very calmly, very patiently. He waits. Again, the smile.

“I climb the mountain to discover the insights that reside with the mountain.”

“Then why do you insist on climbing it? If you find yourself at the summit, you can discover what you seek by

descending. If you find yourself in the meadow, your quest for discovery will lead you to ascend. When you are on the mountain path itself, you must travel by both ascending and descending to complete your journey. Only when you can reconcile the various directions and the unique insights they reveal will you uncover the knowledge you seek.”