

A Conversation with Nishida: The Question

“Answers. Answers. Everyone is always looking for answers,” complained the master, shaking his head in that world-weary way he has. “I do not know why they come to me for answers.”

“Perhaps because you are wise, *sensei*,” I respond.

“Then it is clear that you are not,” he rejoins, now quite energized and far from the weary old man persona he had assumed only a moment before. “Wisdom comes neither from seeking nor possessing answers.”

Now it is my turn to feel weary. What is this thesis process other than looking for answers, answers that no one had previously found? After all, isn't contributing significant new knowledge to the field all about finding new answers? Or perhaps...

“Questions!” I blurt out. “Wisdom does not come from having the right answers, but from asking the right questions.”

“And how do you know that you have the right question?” Nishida asks, raising one eyebrow. I just know he's baiting the trap.

“You have the right question if it leads...” I begin tentatively.

“Yes?” he prods.

“...to the right...”

“Answer?” Nishida smiles wryly. “Then you still have no knowledge. And it seems that you have no method other than running in the maze along with your laboratory rats chasing after your own tail.”

I knew better than to correct his impression that social scientists use lab rats. Well, at least *some* social scientists... and literal lab rats. But still, I *do* know that I have the right question. At least I think I know. After all, I have been living with this question for several years now. It pervades every aspect of my thinking. I can barely read a news report without automatically connecting what happens in the outside world with what is happening in my interior world defined by my research question. Oh, Nishida is indeed a wise master!

“I know that I have the right question because I live it every day – every minute of every day. It is as if my eyes view the world through lenses that are shaped by my question. The

way I live my life and experience the world, moment-to-moment, creates the sense I make of the question. And conversely, my sense of the question creates the way I experience my life.

“So now you are beginning to find the path to wisdom,” he states. “If you can live your question fully, then you have found the question that is right for your life and the particular path on which you find yourself. If you are very fortunate, as you explore and experience that path, you may well, ‘without even noticing it, live your way into the answer,’ as a poet-acquaintance¹ of mine once said.

¹ Rilke (2000) p. 34.