

Body and Beyond: Epistemology and the Body in Japanese Philosophy

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Themes and Goals

This unit aims to show the relevance and significance of the body as a site for knowledge for courses in the humanities and social sciences. Through a close reading of Japanese philosophical texts, the unit explores the ways in which the body can be read as a site for knowledge in Japanese philosophy. In focusing on the notion of mind-body in Japanese philosophy, the unit provides an opportunity to discuss self, identity, subjectivity, nondualism, and knowledge. The readings also provide constructive, rather than simply descriptive, comparative models for pursuing East-West comparisons with undergraduate students. The unit includes a “conceptual workshop” activity that could be applied to a number of disciplines to help students decode complex philosophical texts for a more nuanced understanding of rigorous philosophical concepts.

In Western thought, the separation of mind and body, or dualism, is deeply ingrained in the way of viewing the world. From Plato to Descartes to contemporary philosophers such as Richard RORTY, traditional Western philosophy has viewed the body as that which keeps us from knowledge, which has its origin in the mind, placing reason as the source of knowledge. This unit aims to provide students with a different paradigm, where the body is not an obstacle to knowledge. Rather, in the East Asian philosophical tradition, which does not have the same dualistic starting point, the body is an intimate part of attaining knowledge. In fact, embodied practice is as necessary to knowledge as reason.

The first part of the unit introduces students to the view of the body as a site for knowledge through a close reading of selections from contemporary Japanese philosopher Yasuo YUASA’s *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy* (1993). The second part of the unit provides an opportunity to apply the theory by analyzing a philosophical text in light of the view of the body as a site for knowledge.

The unit uses an East-Asian perspective to explore questions such as:

- How do we attain knowledge?
- How can the body be a site for knowledge?
- What is the self?
- What role does the body have in determining identity or subjectivity?
- What is the Japanese view of the body?
- What is nondualism?

Audience and Uses

The questions explored in this unit are often examined in philosophy, sociology, history and global studies courses. The unit should be accessible to instructors and students who have no prior background in Asian philosophy or Japanese studies.

Student Readings

- *** Most important
- ** Recommended
- * Optional

***YUASA, Yasuo. “The Eastern Tradition of Self-Cultivation and Western Mind-Body Dualism” (pp. 7-10) and “Meditation and Mind-Body Oneness” (pp. 20-23) in Chapter 1 in *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy*, translated by Nagatomo SHIGENORI and Monte S. HULL. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

Introduces the idea of mind-body nondualism in a comparative context. Yuasa provides a succinct but accurate summary of traditional Western philosophy’s view of the relation between mind, body, and knowledge.

***YUASA, Yasuo. “Dōgen” Chapter Six in *The Body: Towards an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, edited by T.P. KASULIS, translated by Nagatomo SHIGENORI and T.P. KASULIS. Albany: SUNY Press, 1987.

Discusses the concept of mind-body in Japanese philosopher Dōgen’s (1200-1253) work and its particular relation to Zen Buddhism.

***DŌGEN, Eihei. “Fukanzazengi: Universal Recommendations for Zazen” (pp.21-23) in *The Art of Just Sitting: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Shikantaza*, edited by John Daido LOORI. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

Dōgen’s own instructions for sitting in zazen and how knowledge is beyond simply the intellectual.

***KEIZAN, Jokin. “Zazen Yojinki” (pp. 41-49) in *The Art of Just Sitting: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Shikantaza*, edited by John Daido LOORI. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

Elaboration of the practice of Dōgen’s zazen meditation and the role of the body in attaining understanding.

** DŌGEN, Eihei. “Zazengi: Rules for Zazen” (pp.19-20) in *The Art of Just Sitting: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Shikantaza*, edited by John Daido LOORI. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

*TAKUAN, Sōhō. “The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom” (pp. 17-44) in *The Unfettered Mind: Writings from the Zen Master to the Sword Master*, translated by William Scott WILSON. New York: Kodansha International, 1986.

Optional Comparative Readings

DESCARTES, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations I & II, translated by John COTTINGHAM. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Available online at http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_descarte.html

In his first two Meditations, Descartes establishes that knowledge comes through reason alone, and that the senses serve only to deceive him. In fact, he even doubts the existence of his own body. What he is certain of is that what it is to be a self is to be “a thinking thing.” His criteria for knowing something is that it be “clear and distinct” and argues that often knowledge that comes to us through our senses is in fact “confused.” This provides an interesting counterpoint for knowledge coming through the body and using the body to know as found in the above readings on Japanese Philosophy. Other meditations also are useful for further comparing notions of selfhood.

Plato, *The Phaedo* as excerpted from *Traversing Philosophical Boundaries*, Max O. HALLMAN, ed. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998. pp. 26-38.

or

Plato, *The Republic*, (esp. Book IV and Book V.) Available online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

In both of these works, (as well as in others), Plato views the body as an impediment to knowledge or enlightenment, as something that must be controlled by the mind. There is much for comparison with Japanese philosophy here.

SPELMAN, Elizabeth, “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views” in *Feminist Studies* 8.1 (Spring 1982) available through J-STOR.

Spelman provides a feminist critique of Plato’s view of the body and also discusses some feminist views of the body and knowledge. The article is very useful to compare both with Plato and Descartes, and also with Japanese philosophy.

Student Activity: Knowing through the Body Conceptual Workshop

The following exercise is a conceptual workshop. For more on conceptual workshops, see “About Conceptual Workshops” on the ExEAS website.

This workshop is designed to have students work through the Yuasa material and think about such questions as:

- What is nondualism?
- What is dualism?
- What is knowledge?
- What role does the body play in acquiring knowledge?

For this particular workshop, in the group discussion the instructor can choose to highlight knowledge, the body, or non-dualism.

The following is also available on the ExEAS website as a worksheet for students.

Reading

YUASA, Yasuo. “The Eastern Tradition of Self-Cultivation and Western Mind-Body Dualism” (pp. 7-10) and “Meditation and Mind-Body Oneness” (pp. 20-23) in Chapter 1 in *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy*, translated by Nagatomo SHIGENORI and Monte S. HULL. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

Part I (60 minutes)

Divide into groups of 3 or 4. Limit discussion of each question to about 10 minutes. Each group should try to agree on an answer to the following questions. Select one person ahead of time to serve as “scribe” and write down the agreed-upon answer. If agreement cannot be reached in the allotted time, then the scribe should record the dissenting views as well. Select a second person at the start to keep an eye on the time and to make sure the group proceeds through the worksheet in a timely manner. Support your answers with the text. This should take you about 1 hour.

1. In pp. 7-10 of today’s reading, Yuasa uses the example of modern medicine to illustrate mind-body dualism. After explaining the concept of mind-body dualism in your own words, discuss other examples of mind-body dualism in our society. What does this tell us about the way the body is viewed with regard to knowledge?
2. Yuasa tells us that in the Japanese tradition, rather than being separated, that mind-body oneness is in fact cultivated and gives examples such as the martial arts. Discuss examples of the cultivation of body-mind oneness in our society.
3. Choose one of the examples you just discussed and explain what sort of knowledge this example gives us. Be sure to also define what you mean by “knowledge.”

4. While it is not explicitly defined in the reading, Yuasa clearly argues that cultivating body-mind oneness leads to some sort of knowledge. How would you characterize this knowledge?

5. What role does the body play in gaining this knowledge? How is it different from the role of the body in cultivation of body-mind oneness in the example discussed in question 3? Are there any similarities?

Part II (30 minutes): Class discussion of the results