



***The Nuido seen through Zen,  
the entire universe on the point of the needle  
by Massimo S. Shido<sup>1</sup>***

There was a moment, that cannot be pinpointed in time, when the *Nihon no Shishu*, the traditional Japanese embroidery, passed through “the gateless gate”,<sup>2</sup> thus falling into the arms of Zen and becoming *Nuido*, the Way of the Thread.

In this “passage” the extraordinary form of decoration for objects of the external world, adornment for the garments of the nobles of the Imperial court, the powerful feudal lords and the actors of the Noh theatre, and later those of the wealthy merchants and the world of the geishas, still present in the most important occasions of Japanese life adorning ceremonial Kimonos and Obis, underwent a mutation of its essence, becoming a path towards knowledge of oneself, of the Self.

The artist of traditional embroidery became also a spiritual seeker.

Nothing is apparently changed: the subjects continue to be those characteristic of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility: animals, trees, flowers, water and mountains. The same is true of the materials: the fabric is made of pure silk, the cloth traditionally used for kimonos and obis, plain or painted with a brush, or even woven with gold and silver thread. The techniques are by now a shared and consolidated heritage; the needle flies numberless times through the cloth with movements that are always extraordinarily precise, elegant and light.

In reality, absolutely everything can be changed: essentially the vision of the world, and hence also the vision of what is represented on the fabric.

The attentive and meticulous observation of the object, which is moreover *other* in respect of the artist of the *Nihon no Shishu* who investigates it, follows a much more complex and dynamic process: the seeker of the *Nuido* focuses his spiritual energy to discern the profound nature of what he intends to portray, harmonising his breathing to the movement of the needle, fusing his own spirit with the spirit of the thing, so that, in the end, the fabric “comes alive”.

It is a process of reciprocal penetration, of fusion between the exterior and the interior, which can lead to the result splendidly expressed by a great fifth-century expert on Chinese art, Xie He, who identified in the “Spiritual Tone Pulsating with Life” one of the (six) fundamental requisites of a work of art.<sup>3</sup> When the Spiritual Tone is manifest, the composition reveals the metaphysical significance that lies behind each object portrayed.

In other words, in the fabric of a work of *Nuido* we do not find the exterior image of a tree or of a mountain, but rather the precipitate of an experience of identification through which the energy, the vital rhythm that pervades the entire universe and permeates nature, is “impressed” on the canvas; the needle “attracts” this dynamic force into the Relative, the fabric, where it remains as a vibration of the Eternal.

In the final analysis, the innumerable movements of the needle that make up a work of *Nuido* can, from a Zen point of view, be traced to a single and unique action, articulated like a breath (inhalation, pause, exhalation) in three moments that correspond to the three mental/spiritual states of the seeker: *the needle flies towards the silk, the needle touches the silk, the needle leaves the silk*.

The state in which "*the needle flies towards the silk*" is the level of empirical experience, that in which we are immersed in everyday reality and which is characterised by the conviction that the all entities (from the atom to the needle, to the flower, to the galaxy, to the entire universe) have their own immutable ontological essence, and this is true for each of us too; it is the phase of the launch of the research, of the approach to the spiritual art, during which we can sense an indefinable impression that the true reality about oneself and the things that are present in the real world is of an absolutely different nature. The seeker approaches the Master, notes his authority, benefits from his protection and his teaching, educates himself in concentration, and realises that, in order to comprehend the object that he wishes to represent on the cloth, he has to "become the object". The work that the artist expresses in this phase can be technically perfect, but not yet endowed with the "spiritual breath".

The state in which "*the needle touches the silk*" illustrates that the illusory nature of reality as it is perceived in the previous state has been understood. The process of identification suddenly reveals that there are no ontologically stable and permanent entities, and that in the very moment in which they are "experienced", that flower, that animal, that waterfall will abandon all their specific features and individual limitations, becoming... an Absolute, becoming the entire universe. A great Zen master said "when *that* flower opens, it is spring all over the world". In this state, the work cannot be anything but a blank space in which absolutely nothing is portrayed: "the most difficult thing of all in painting", according to Ike-no Taiga (1723-1776), one of the great Japanese painters of the Edo Period.

Finally, the state in which "*the needle leaves the silk*" expresses the correct understanding of the nature of reality, which returns at once distinct and unified; the work marvellously represents the object with its specific features while also immanent in it is the all-pervasive cosmic energy.

In the above sense, therefore, in *Nuido* on the point of the needle there can be the entire universe which, from the metaphysical abyss of the Void, finds on the silk an ontological manifestation, which then immediately disappears.

The *Nuido* is a truly complex Way, because the seeker must maintain constantly active, for long periods, an elevated spiritual sensitivity (differently from other arts, such as calligraphy, for example, in which the artistic manifestation is expressed in very swift and sudden gestures). A crucial role is played by the awareness of the space within which the *Nuido* manifests itself: this is, in its own way, a sacred, non-spatial and non-temporal space, in which the formal order is a mirror of the spiritual order of the person who accesses it, in which the utmost attention has to be paid to posture, to concentration, to identification in the act.

Thus we can experience "the emotion of embroidering", leaving behind the world of the many and accessing the world of the one, the world of Zen.

When the work is *Nuido*, what remains on the fabric is an expression of absolute simplicity, the mystery of an original and eternal manifestation.

*The sun shines  
The flower blossoms*

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<sup>1</sup> This article "reads" *Nuido* from a Zen perspective, also drawing inspiration from topics and lines of interpretation present in the masterful studies of Toshihiko Izutsu; I have some direct knowledge of Zen, having been since 1987 a disciple of the Master Engaku Taino. However, I have never picked up a needle: I approached *Nuido* by observing my wife, Stefania Iacomi, at work, admiring her works and those of her Master Mireille Amar, listening to their conversations. Consequently this very different manner, and depth, of knowledge of the two worlds has to be borne in mind. I should like here to express my gratitude to Master Shuji Tamura for the opportunity offered to me to write about the relations between *Nuido* and Zen for the *Nuido Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> The *Mumonkan* (The gateless gate), originally published in China towards the end of the Southern Sung dynasty (thirteenth century AD) is a famous collection of koans used for centuries to encourage the enquiry and training of the Zen practitioners. The "gateless gate" is a paradoxical expression which indicates that the gate of the Dharma is gateless: passing through this gateless barrier we open our eyes to the Truth of Zen, to the Absolute.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Toshihiko Izutsu, *Toward a philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, 1977, Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. Reference could be made to Izutsu's text for an in-depth examination of the influence of Zen on the arts of oriental matrix (calligraphy, the tea ceremony or that of incense, martial arts, archery, ikebana).