
‘Preparation’ for Creative Inspiration : From the teaching of Japanese classical ‘Keiko; exercise and expertise’

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Abstract. This paper discusses creative inspiration. These special experiences occur when the person undergoing them experiences without intention, plan, or expectation. Such experiences seem to happen by themselves, arriving like a gift from an unknown sender. The key questions thus become: Can we somehow ‘prepare’ for this gift? Are there any special conditions which facilitate the arrival of such experiences?

According to the Japanese teaching of Keiko, there is a kind of ‘reversal’ or ‘turnaround’ in the process of exercise and expertise. At first the approach is aimed at mastering skills but thereafter the ‘aim’ is to be free from those same skills. Skills and techniques are important. However, there is the danger of being attached to methods to such an extent that it disturbs the fluidity of natural movement. The Japanese teaching of Keiko transmits the state of ‘no intention’ or ‘no artificiality’ in daily performance. This stage is said to be ‘Beyond Skills.’

This stage overlaps with the ‘Setback Situation’, a state in which the usual method no longer works. In other words, the conventional approach no longer yields results and seems to lead one into a dead end. According to Keiko, however, such darkness is also potentiality, the source from which something new will arise. If we attend to ourselves in this darkness, the time will come when the sprout of potentiality begins to emerge. During this ‘incubation period’ we must not be in hurry, as creative inspiration emerges on its own. It always grows beyond the grasp of intention. It appears out of nowhere and of its own accord. This is the flow of the Keiko teaching, as represented in the ‘Innovation Diagram’.

However, doubts often rise when no results are forthcoming from this incubation period - no innovation, no original ideas, no sprouts. Instead, the period is marked by great ordeal of trial and error, darkness and usually much doubt. Is such an ‘incubation period’ still worthwhile? The teaching of Keiko affirms ‘yes’. The ‘incubation period’ is always of value, but just as it is: it is important not because it will yield a new sprout but because it is the place we find our alternative self as the fluidity of natural movement.

It thus becomes most difficult for us, in the Japanese classical teaching, to evaluate such an ‘incubation period’. To be sure, resignation is the optimal condition for awaiting the gift of inspiration, but such resignation is not synonymous with despair or hopelessness. Rather, this resignation should convey a sense of ‘beyond skills’, ‘beyond conventional framework’, ‘free from any presupposition’ and ‘free from any articulations’. ‘Free from articulations’ is valuable not because of the intended result, but instead because this freedom itself of its intrinsic value.

Potential evaluators should view the ‘incubation period’ without expectations of results because, on the first level of productivity, this is the optimal condition for creative inspiration. But on the second deeper level, this is because ‘to be free from articulations’ is valuable and luminous by itself.

This is the essential point of the classical Japanese teaching of Keiko.

Keywords: Creativity, Inspiration, Keiko, Japanese Philosophy, Innovation

1. Introduction

There are many kinds of 'creative inspiration', many different genres if you will. There is the sudden inspiration of composers, an original breakthrough in primary research of scholars, and the sublime performance of the athletes among others. The latter is now often called 'being in the zone', suggesting that one's experiences exist in a space apart.

These special experiences are often described by the person who undergoes them as follows: it came by itself, it happened without my intention, no plan, nor expectation for this inspiration, and so on. If we understand these moments as bestowing of benefits or gifts previously unimagined, the next questions become: Is it possible to 'prepare' for them or not? Are there any special conditions which facilitate or invite the bestowal of these gifts?

We cannot produce the 'creative inspiration' by our own intention. But does that mean we must only wait for it? Is there nothing to do except to look forward to the moment it descends upon us? Is it not possible to do something which invites conferral? Are there special attitudes that can persuade it to come in? Even if there is no way to invite or persuade, is there something that can be done to ensure that it arrives undisturbed?

If we name this benefit 'Serendipity', the question then becomes: Can we describe any conditions that lets Serendipity come in and, when it does, to do so without disturb its arrival?

2. Two Ways: The way to learn skills and the way to be free from skills

According to the Japanese teaching of Keiko, there is a kind of 'reversal' or 'turnaround' in the process of exercise and expertise. It seems easier to describe these utilizing concrete examples.

Clinical psychologists tell us that 'Master clinicians' often provide narrative account of their clinical practice that seem to suggest that they have no special skills or techniques when undertaking their practice. They describe themselves as just being relaxed, listening to clients without analyses or judgements. Master clinicians often use curious, seemingly self-deprecating expressions to describe their attitude: absentminded, totally lost in thought, or sometimes even a 'blockhead'.

However this may sound, a serious problem would arise if beginners simply imitated this attitude. It might even be quite dangerous for beginners to read Masters accounts and try to emulate them, assuming that being absentminded is the key to mastery.

If the beginners or students who have little clinical experience imitate such attitudes, their clinical practice would surely be unsuccessful and end in failure. The process would not unfold as expected. Correctly, the process which should arise from the client does not happen in the encounter with this beginner clinician.

There are other difficulties facing the beginners. At the outset of their training, beginners have to pay attention to all of their own words and manners. They have to learn how to be fully conscious of all that happens in the relationship with the client. The beginners strive 'to be conscious', 'to understand the situation', 'to judge timely', but all of this runs in the opposite direction from what beginners have heard from the masters as the key attitude in their practice. Beginners seem to be heading, it seems, in the exact opposite direction of their final goal. Masters say that they are 'absentminded', but students have to exert much effort and learn special ways of attentiveness. Masters say that they need no special skills, but students have to learn myriad new skills and theories.

Let us consider again the master's attitude. Master clinicians explain that they need no special skills. Yet, upon closer inspection this 'no skill' takes for granted that they can use skills. Masters are not without skills, but instead know how and when to utilize their skills. They can practice with conscious of skills and they can practice without consciousness of their skills. In this way, we can say that the Masters have truly mastered skills.

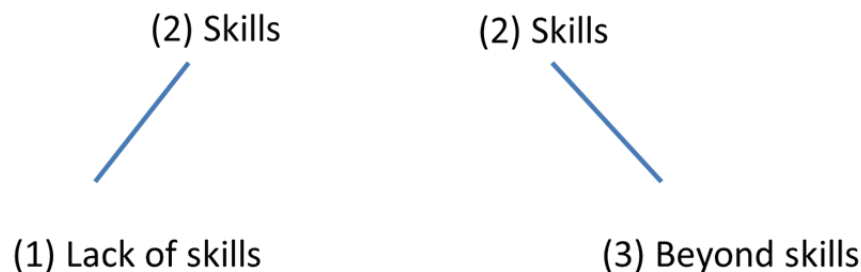
In contrast, the ‘no skills’ of the beginners are, literally, no skills. They can neither use skills nor use them in a timely manner because they have not fully understood them. That is, they have yet to master skills.

From this example, we see two different directions on the process of exercise and expertise: the way to learn skills and the way to be free from skills. The two ways are part of the one.

3. A tentative framework for discussion

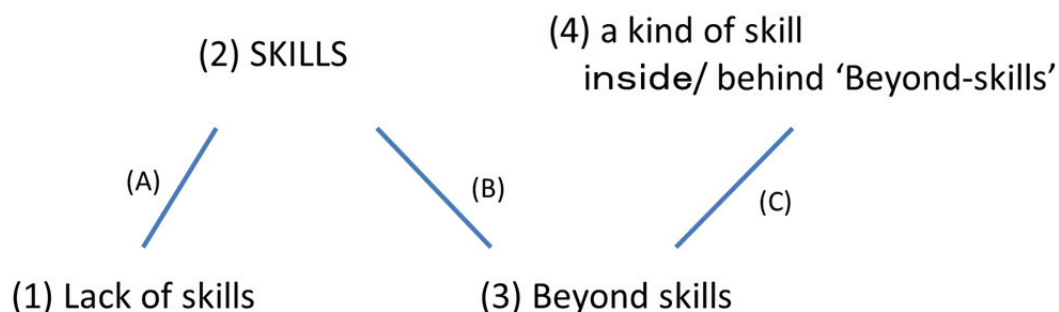
3.1. Diagram

A simple diagram may help deepen the discussion. As the way to learn skills we understand the process as movement from the stage of (1) ‘Lack of skills’ to (2) ‘Skills’. In contrast, the way to be free from skills can be understood as the movement from (2) ‘Skills’ to (3) ‘Beyond skills’.



Our first question becomes more clear; Are the master’s stage of ‘Beyond skills’ the same as the first stage of ‘Lack of skills’ (1).

Let us attempt to sketch the differences between two stages. ‘Beyond-skills’ (3) does not signify a simple lack of skills, but it signifies the potential containment of a new kind of skill inside (or perhaps behind). We now arrive at a critical point. To examine this relationship carefully, let us add the fourth stage of ‘a new quality skill’ to the diagram. That is the stage of ‘a new quality skills inside/behind ‘Beyond skills’ ’.



We may describe the diagram as follows:

(1) ‘Lack of skills’ means the state of being inexperienced, unskilled and without discipline. In contrast, the term ‘Beyond-skills’ means ‘no skills after mastery of skills’, or ‘pattern-less-ness which transcends the pattern’.

To make the first stage clear we may characterize it as ‘immature’. But this stage means, at the same time, pure potentiality. The ambiguity entailed in a negative immaturity and a positive potentiality will be discussed in more detail below.

2) 'SKILLS' represents techniques coupled with intention or a sort of artificial play with conscious attention. This stage represents intentions, knowledges, skills – all features which make the world divide and possible to articulate.

3) 'Beyond-skills' transcend the stage of 'SKILLS'. Here there is no intention, no artificial technique, no control of one's own movement. That is to say, this stage is free from any kind of articulation.¹

4) As for 'a new quality of skills inside Beyond skills (4)' this stage is characterized by a special ambiguity which includes two moments which are mutually exclusive. It is, on the one hand, no skills, on the other hand, a new quality of skills.² We might describe this is an event in which a new quality skill is arising from the level of no skills.³

3.2. Three processes

Another way to understand the diagram is to see three processes: Process (A) as construction, Process (B) as de-construction, and Process (C) as a re-construction.

Skills and techniques are important. However, if the actor is clinging to these artificial skills his performance continues to be intentional. There is the danger of being captivated by self-awareness resulting in the disturbance of naturally fluidity.

The Japanese teaching of Keiko centers the state of 'no intention', 'no artificiality', 'no paying attention to one's own movement' through performance. It foregrounds the importance for performers to move according to the natural movement of one's body, that is, to move just as his body dictates in the changing situation of the drama.

In order to identify with their role, performers in a play must master but then release: not only all the skills which one has acquired in preparation for the role (Process A), but also all of his intentions, motivations and self-awareness that were part of the initial process of learning (Process B)

Process C is a re-construction or the re-birth of new awareness. Here it is important to avoid the misunderstanding that the intention of Skills is preserved behind the façade of Beyond Skills and appears now again in Process C. Intention and awareness will pass away in Process B. Performers 'seek' to attain the perfect abnegation of the intention on the way to de-construction. After the perfect abnegation, the new kind of intention will emerge from the bottom of no-intention.

¹ We call this stage 'Mushin' according to the Japanese classical thought. Mu-shin means, literally, 'non-mind' (無 MU ; non, nothing, emptiness, naught, 心 SHIN; mind, heart, intention). In the context of this article this term will be translated as 'a selfless level of art', 'being without intent', 'a kind of excitement and luminosity that transcends the mind'.

² It might be helpful to think about this also in terms of different qualities of consciousness: while the stage (3) was the stage of being free from consciousness or having no reflective awareness, there is a new kind of awareness at this stage (4). This new consciousness is never identical with the consciousness of stage (2) which makes the outer world an 'object' in the dichotomized 'self' and 'object' paradigm. In this new consciousness of stage 4, there is no 'self' standing distinct from the object. The 'self' considered here is the self that has coalesced into the amalgamated subject of 'self=object'. For that reason, consciousness executed by the amalgamated subject ('self=object') also is entirely different to the ordinary subject consciousness.

³ We might call this mystical stage (4) 'double-eyes'. Double-eyes could see a new kind of articulation based on the no-articulation (No-skills, No-intentions). It is not the same as skill or intention in the stage of 'Skills': rather it has been transformed by Mushin. A master with double-eyes can accept two moments which are mutually exclusive. Double-eyes perceive ambiguous events in a fluid dynamic process. Double-eyes might also be characterized as 'beyond dichotomy' or 'unity of opposites'.

For the purpose of exposition here, I have described Process C coming after Process B. Strictly speaking, this is not accurate. It is not a problem of a linear progress in time. Process C does not begin after the end of Process B.⁴

4. On the way to expertise: Some Difficulties

4.1. Kata

In the teaching of Japanese classical 'Keiko' the term 'Kata' is highly significant. 'Kata'(型) means literally something like: a model, mold, matrix, form, pattern, style, or stamp. It is utilized in phrases such as 'to cut according to a pattern', 'to cast into a mold', 'to pour liquid into a mold and let it coalesce'.

However, Kata also implies something more than simply molds and patterns which fix materials according to outside compulsion. In the context of Keiko, kata comes to imply two different functions.

At the early stages of Keiko, Kata as a mold fixes the movement of beginners. Kata does not arise from the movement of beginners but it comes from the outside and directs movement into a fixed pattern. Beginners have to learn a particular Kata repeatedly till they acquire the fixed pattern. Seemingly endless repetition, day in and day out, is the typical image here.

However, once beginners acquire the Kata and master the proper form, this Kata enables them to move freely. Movement according to Kata becomes not only natural but it is most comfortable and relaxed. At this stage of accomplishment, participants feel they are carried along the flow by virtue of the Kata. Or to put it another way, without Kata it now becomes impossible to move naturally.

In this way, the mastery of kata supports and encourages movement from the inside, even while in earlier stages Kata stood outside and antagonistically opposed to the children at the early stages.

It is important to note, however, that it is only an expedience for purposes of exposition here to differentiate these two stages. A definitive distinction between the two functions or phases of Kata is never possible in practice. These functions of Kata work together, while – seemingly paradoxically - at the same time conflict.

4.2. 'Readiness' and a reconstruction of Kata

The second problem is of 'readiness'. This is referred to as 'Shita-ji' (下地) in the Keiko teaching. The issue is this: Does Kata work effectively even for beginners who lack proper readiness?

Take an example of an anthropologist who visited a small mountain village and tried to learn the native dances that were central to the life of this village culture. While the anthropologist diligently learned to dance alongside the village children, his movement was somehow different. He imitated their movements and tried to acquire the Kata - the special form. However, he came to realize that the difference lie in the fact that the village children had already acquired the proper 'readiness' in their body *before* the dance-lesson. More correctly, he understood that he had a different readiness or a different Kata which did not work effectively in the context of mastering this village dance.

Accordingly, it is best to think of Kata as something that everybody already has. Keiko does not suggest that a beginner wholly lacks Kata and begins to learn Kata from nothing, but instead that the beginner who has already acquired one Kata begins to learn another Kata. This means that beginners have to learn the new Kata with casting off the old one – a process that occurs simultaneously. More correctly, to learn Kata means a rearrangement or reconstruction process from one Kata to another Kata.

⁴ In Zen-Buddhism the Processes B and C are said to begin 'immediately' and 'simultaneously'. Two different processes are united into one. De-construction and Re-construction have to be understood as simultaneous events. The way to Mushin and the way from Mushin are united into one. Zen-Buddhism has a special category called 'SOKU 即', meaning literally, 'at once'. It is explained that 'the state in which two things that seem to be different outside are one inside.' It is the provocative state of dichotomy or, in other words, the 'unity of opposites'.

Village children have the 'proper' readiness, one that works efficiently for the village dance. We can imagine that historically the village dance is derived from this readiness itself, a form which has been most natural within the context of this village life. Unfortunately, the outside researcher has no such readiness. He has already acquired a different Kata, one which work efficiently for his urban life. In this way, this process of learning for him is not simply one of imitation of the new Kata, but also one of casting off the old Kata and making his body ready to fit the village life through the learning of the new Kata.

Thus, learning Kata means not only adding new form on the ground of 'readiness' but also to renovate the basic terms of 'readiness' itself in order that the newly acquired Kata can function naturally.

4.3. Music and Scores

We can also think of a musical score as a Kata. Score can describe only one level of music, one which never expresses the entire musical performance. It is important to remember that ethnic music such as Irish folk music or Gamelan from Bali can never be described perfectly according to the modern score of western music. In these musical performances the most important element is the fluidity and atmosphere, aspects which can never be described in the language of the score.

Japanese classical teaching of Keiko suggests that it is impossible for us to learn this fluidity and atmosphere from accomplished masters. It is equally impossible for the masters to teach these aspects to beginners. The most important elements are beyond teaching and learning. However, beginners can learn the scores and, after sufficient mastery of the scores, the atmosphere may appear, often as if from nowhere. The virtuoso beyond skills transmits not through the scores directly. However, it can never be transmitted without scores as well.

The first move is to master scores and skills. But then the virtuoso beyond skills becomes fragrant as if from the inside.

5. Value of the 'incubation period' and 'resignation'

I have discussed the diagrams presented above many times with many different people. Through doing so, I came to think that there is overlap in the stage of 'Beyond skills' (3) to the 'setback situation', i.e. the situation in which the usual method does not work anymore. Again, the 'setback situation' is a dead end where the conventional approaches does not work, one generating considerable perplexity in that we can't go farther with the same pattern as we have done before.

We never will such a situation, but we inevitably fall into it. The process of 'to release', 'to unlearn' and 'self-emptying' comes from failure, emerging in the wake of perplexity and crisis. Sometimes we feel we have fallen and continue to fall, into darkness without end.

In terms of the diagram, however, such darkness may be the place of potentiality: the space from in which something new will emerge. If we take care of ourselves in this darkness, the time will come when a new sprout begins to appear. During this 'incubation period' the worse attitude is to be in a hurry. We must wait; repose in the situation until it change and the sprout arises by itself.

Now the questions become: Do we have anything to do with this sprout? Should we only wait for it? In terms of the diagram, is it not a time of challenge where an accumulation of regular training will be tested?

I have come across another diagram which is called the 'Innovation Diagram', one developed by Professor Eiichi Yamaguchi, a researcher of physics and business administration⁵. His diagram came from his case studies of the innovations in many corporations. He suggests that innovations do not come from the established paradigm directly, but emerge once an older paradigm is dropped once

⁵ In his latest book, Professor Yamaguchi made reference to my discussion, that he found the same dynamism with my creative inspiration from a standpoint of his innovation theory (Yamaguchi, 2016, p.121).

dropped, a period of apparent stagnation marked by a great deal of trial and error ensues, and then –as if by coincidence - an inspiration arrives.

Professor Yamaguchi uses the term of ‘Field of Resonance’ to signify the matrix of supporting conditions that come together in these occurrences of inspiration. Some examples from business might include supporting conditions such as, a good rapport with one’s superiors, ample time and freedom from deadlines, etc. Isolating these conditions is important from an administrative viewpoint. However, my question concerns the value of the perplexing darkness in the middle, what I have called the ‘incubation period’.

Does this darkness have value because it is the mother of new innovation? If so, this means that without innovation this ‘darkness’ lacks inherent value. In other words, is this endurance of darkness all for naught without results? Is it simply a failure or a mere waste of time and effort?

Keiko suggests that ‘Beyond-skills, that is ‘without skills’ has its own intrinsic value. That is, even if it gives birth to nothing it is importance. Even if a great deal of trial and error yields no innovations, trial and error already has its own value, just as it is.

The classical teachings encourage us that a new sprout will come out by itself in due course. However, it also suggest to us that, seemingly paradoxically, the being in the stage of ‘without-skills’ has its own significance without any reference to results.

This is teaching rooted in the concept of ‘Mushin’. ‘Mushin’ is never a means. It is never a step for the next stage. To be Mushin is as important as to look for Mushin. To be in darkness is, paradoxically, one way of shining.

6. Conclusion

So to return to the question that began our inquiry: How can we prepare ourselves for the ‘Creative inspiration’? According to the Keiko-teaching, we have to first learn the Kata, a special pattern or form, which allows us to master the proper skills naturally. However, the Kata is never an endpoint, never an almighty. Kata brings us effectively to a certain point, but over that limitation the Kata can not work effectively. In the worse, it can restrict us into a fixed framework.

Having reached a point where the conventional Kata no longer works, we fall into the setback situation - a crisis period or apparent dead end. We are forced to reflect ourselves and begin the trials of trial and error. But another way to view this is as an ‘incubation period’ where something is moving in the direction of a new creativity.

Within or perhaps after such period, creative inspiration arises of its own accord. We can never control this occurrence by our intention. It appears out of nowhere.

This is the flow of the Keiko teaching, as depicted in the ‘Innovation Diagram’. However, a key question arises when no results are forthcoming from this incubation period. No innovation, no original idea, no sprout come outs, but just a great ordeal of trial and error.

Is such an ‘incubation period’ worthwhile? The teaching of Keiko answers yes. The ‘incubation period’ is valuable by itself. It is important not because it will yield a new sprout, but because it is intrinsically valuable.

It is very interesting that, almost paradoxically, such an interpretation of the incubation period is the best condition for the new innovation. The acceptance of what we may call ‘resignation’ turns out to be mother of the creative inspiration. New innovations issue not from strong intention but from a kind of ‘resignation’. It is in release, abnegation, and self-emptying, that the sprout of inspiration grows the easiest.

Here, however, I have again fallen into the trap that the resignation is valuable because of the new result. Again, this is not the case: resignation is valuable by itself and for itself.

This is the point of the classical teaching of Keiko. Within it, it becomes most difficult for us to evaluate such an ‘incubation period’. Resignation is the optimal condition for the new inspiration, but this resignation is not equal with despair or hopelessness. Rather, resignation signifies ‘beyond skills’, ‘beyond conventional framework’, ‘free from any presupposition’ and ‘free from any articulations’.

'Free from articulations' is valuable not because of the new result but it is valuable by itself.

As such, would-be evaluator should view such 'incubation period' without expecting any result, because, on the first level of productivity, this is the optimal condition for the creative inspiration, but on a second deeper level because 'to be free from articulations' is valuable and luminous by itself. This is the essential point of the classical teaching of Keiko.

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