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James Shields
jms089@bucknell.edu

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Stepping in the Same River Twice
James Mark Shields

I find my home, my god and my purpose in the clear, cold, rushing waters of a small stream that runs down Mt. Atago, to the northeast of the beautiful and historic city of Kyoto, Japan. Though known as Kiyotaki—literally, ‘pure falls’—I have yet to see the falls themselves. Perhaps they do not exist. I don’t care. As for purity, I have my doubts that there is such a thing, or that believing in such is ever a good idea. No, I like mongrels, mixing, *mazeru koto*. I prefer complications to sureties, doubt to certainty, scepticism to belief.

A wise man is said to have said: “Things change, my friends; be vigilant.” What he meant was not ‘resist change’, but rather be aware of its flow, its dynamics, and embrace the blissful contingency that is life. And then he died from eating bad mushrooms. I *hope* this last part is true, since it seems so human, so random and ordinary (we’ve had enough crucifixions for one world cycle). Before he died, this provocative fellow also taught that there was no such thing as a ‘self’—and I agree with him, though I think he was mistaken about other things.

I take my kids to Mt. Atago and hope that they will discover something too. Unlike myself, my children have ancestors who looked up from Kyoto at Mt. Atago with respect and awe—but also with fear, since mountains were and are abodes of demons and sages who abandon this world. The mountain and its waters are as much a product of human ideas, fears, wishes, and hopes as they are of geological processes (though no more, of course).

I locate my philosophy of life in a Japanese mountain stream because I am a materialist. Materialism gets a bad rap. For one, it is commonly associated with consumerist conviction that a person can find happiness or satisfaction through the accumulation of money and the things money can buy. But this is not my materialism, since it is rooted in a set of ideas—or beliefs—about things and the self.

I have no desire to privilege matter over spirit or anything else. All that I want to do is remind my kids not to take ‘big ideas’ too seriously, such that they forget the things that truly matter: love, compassion, friendship, and seduction, including the seduction of things, so “innocent and ours.” These are not ideas; they are embodied practices, which we ‘discover’ with other beings, and in the world at large. By the way, the name Atago can be translated as the ‘cave dwelling’—or ‘stone quarry’—of love. I have no idea why the mountain is called this, but I appreciate the imagery.

Since I have now abjured *belief*, and put into question the presence of a stable and enduring *I*, it seems that all I am left with in the phrase “This I believe” is *this*. But perhaps *this* is all I need.