In contrast to the signification of the pointlessness of ego in ‘Donguri’ (see Chapter 3) or a supernatural sense of union in ‘Yukiwatari’ (see Chapter 4), this chapter deals with Miyazawa Kenji’s dekunobō ideal. Two quite disparate protagonists from ‘Serohiki no Gōshu’, written in 1925, and ‘Kenjū Kōenrin’, written in about 1927, embody contrasting aspects of the altruistic ideal. The striving Gōshu can be seen to represent the struggle towards the ideal, while the intellectually impaired Kenjū can be seen to epitomise its aim. There is some debate about the latter point, however, with some scholars arguing that Kenjū cannot exemplify the dekunobō ideal because of his lack of conscious purpose. In contrast, Gōshu’s striving is seen as representative of the effort needed to achieve the ideal. Tokita Tsutomu, for instance, sees “the desire for hidden detachment exhibited in Gōshu” as a positive acknowledgment of “trying to actively connect with the future.” This chapter examines how dekunobō intersubjectivity is reflected in these contrasting characters and their pictorial representations.

Miyazawa’s dekunobō ideal is rather paradoxical and thus more complex than any simple dictionary definition can offer. While the literal meaning of the word is something like blockhead or dunce, Miyazawa used the term as an exemplar about how to live life in the poem known as Ame ni mo Makezu (Not yielding to the Rain). This poem was found in the notebook which he kept with him until his death and expresses his main principles and practices. Kerstin Vidaeus notes it as a kind of prayer for the strength to maintain a life dedicated to serving others. The conclusion ironically introduces the dekunobō (dunce) as a model:

someone called
a dunce
by everybody
someone who is neither praised
nor troublesome
this is
how
I want
to be.
In the same notebook there is also an outline for a play called Dekunobō. A note near the title says; “this is how we want to become” (wareware kō iu/ mono ni naritai) and indicates Miyazawa’s preoccupation with the concept of selflessness. As Hara Shirō suggests, Miyazawa’s specific use of the pronoun ‘we’ (wareware) instead of ‘I’ (watashi) here shows his concern with pushing beyond any modern notion of individualism to include respect and hope for all life.

According to Suzuki Kenji, Miyazawa’s use of the term dekunobō originates from the image of the bodhisattva figure he emulated in his lifestyle, Fukyū (Fukyū Bosatsu) from the Lotus Sutra. Fukyū continued to worship in this world, enduring people’s contempt and persecution in order show that anyone could become a Buddha. Fukyū thus symbolises the idea of a more ‘practical’ path which has similarities with both Kenjū’s endurance and Gōshu’s striving in ‘Serohiki.’

Fukyū also raises the notion of jūriki (the path to enlightenment through self-effort) within the dekunobō ideal. According to Miyazawa’s Lotus Sutra ideals, enlightenment should be attainable for anyone through struggle and active practice in this life. This involves a process that, despite the aforementioned assertions of his lack of conscious intent, is not entirely absent in Kenjū, but is expressed more explicitly through Gōshu’s overt struggle.

The names and distinguishing characteristics of the two main protagonists also reflect the two related yet seemingly contradictory aspects of dekunobō. On the one hand, Gōshu is derived from the French word gauche and, as Vidaeus points out, although his gauche, awkward ineptitude resonates with the dekunobō ideal, the character has “deeper psychological scope” than the usual pejorative connotations associated with gaucheness. According to Satō Taihei, the name Gōshu came to Miyazawa as he was playing the cello, and the term involves Gōshu’s ability to surmount his own inadequacies and achieve a dekunobō-like spirit through effort. On the other hand, the source of Kenjū’s special powers as a dekunobō is also signified in his name. The kanji characters for Kenjū are made up of ken, meaning “to modestly carry something through to the end,” and jū, which means the number ‘ten.’ This jū immediately connotes the Buddhist notion of jūriki, the ten fields of knowledge that only belong to a Buddha (hotoke), whose wisdom surpasses all human knowledge. When the scholar in the closing scene of ‘Kōenrin’ says: “It is simply astonishing how the effects of jūriki are everywhere” (Tada doko made no jūriki no sayō wa fushigi desu), he is referring to the wisdom of Kenjū. Taken together, the characters for Kenjū thus have similar connotations to jūriki and, indeed by association, jiriki self-power. It is paradoxically Kenjū’s intellectual disability that allows his stoicism and ‘wisdom’.

The complex concept of dekunobō, as awkwardness, selflessness, equality or rejection of elitism, is tied in with notions of overcoming superficial social judgements, but is also about deeper self-assessment. It expresses a respect for the intrinsic qualities of things, rejecting comparisons between things and valuing individual differences. Kenjū’s mental weakness amounts to genius while Gōshu’s inner demons are valued as part of a necessary struggle towards achieving a dekunobō awareness. Aspects of dekunobō-like self-assessment are also found in the underlying sense of struggle between competitive elements like shura (demons) and makoto (truth/sincerity), both external and internal. Whereas Suzuki maintains that dekunobō is an investigation of conflict between the shura and makoto as the two extremes within the self, Hara sees it as more concerned with reconciliation, the resolution of the internal drama. Nishida Yoshiko suggests something similar to Hara in that, because Miyazawa acknowledged the pain of shura but was always searching for sincerity (makoto), his spirit of dekunobō was the product born out of the interaction between shura and ‘the true path’ (makoto no michi). In this sense, Gōshu’s personal struggle demonstrates the angst-ridden path towards the ideal, whereas Kenjū, through his naive innocence, is closer to the aim. They contrast with the type of external conflict apparent between the acorns in ‘Wildcat and the Acorns’ (Donguri to Yamaneko)