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*D. T. Suzuki's Life in La Salle*

## I

In 1897 Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki made his first trip to the West at the age of 27. He stayed in La Salle in the state of Illinois for eleven years, working for Dr. Paul Carus and the Open Court Publishing Company. His stay there was arranged by his master Shaku Sōyen, of Engakuji Monastery at Kamakura, who had attended the Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Dr. Paul Carus was a progressive thinker of German origin with keen and sincere interest in Oriental thought, and was known for his work, *The Gospel of Buddha*. Upon the request of Dr. Carus, who was looking for an assistant from Japan with knowledge of both Chinese classics and English, Shaku Sōyen recommended the young Daisetz. At the time Dr. Carus was engaged in translating the *Tao Te Ching* into English, and during this period, Daisetz did research and translations of Buddhist and Taoist texts with him. Suzuki's original work, as well as joint translations with Dr. Carus were successively published by Open Court.<sup>1</sup>

The Open Court Company is still known for its publications, especially books on philosophical thought. It still publishes the quarterly magazine, *The Monist*. Dr. Carus was born in Germany in 1852 and educated under Schopenhauer. Among his close friends were such well-known people as K. R. E. von Hartmann and Max Scheler. In 1886 he emigrated to the United States where he married

<sup>1</sup> They are as follows: Lao-tze's *The Canon of Reason and Virtue* (Tao-te-ching, 1898), Aśvaghosha's *Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (1900), *T'ai-shang Kan-yin P'ien* (1906), *Yin Chin Wen* ((1906), *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot* (1906), and *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907).

the eldest daughter of Mr. Hegeler, another German immigrant who had come to the United States at the beginning of the 1840's and then became one of the Illinois millionaires.

## II

In April, 1966, I was able to visit La Salle. Rev. Toshiaki Saito, Mr. Mitsuru Yamada, Mr. Roger Adams, of the Chicago Buddhist Church drove me there. I had long wanted to visit this place where Dr. Suzuki as an unknown young man spent over ten years in contemplation and study. I felt that this period must have been invaluablely formative for him. As a sensitive young man, full of ambition and desire for study and living in solitude in a foreign environment, he entered the twentieth century. It may be said that the inception of all his philosophical and intellectual activities thereafter can be traced back to this period. It was here that his Buddhist thought was brought for the first time into direct confrontation with modern thought rooted in the soil of Christian tradition. It may also be said that his life-direction was established there and then. In addition, I was attracted to La Salle as the young Suzuki had been there when he was nearly my present age.

La Salle<sup>1</sup> is situated southwest of Chicago, about one and a half hour's ride by car. It is said that decades ago it was a three hours' train journey from Chicago. In spite of the tremendous development of the modern highways, La Salle preserves even now the modest appearance of earlier days, and it is still a calm, rural town of 14,000 inhabitants. Sometimes we even saw moles crawling out onto the highway.

We went to see the house where the young Suzuki lived in La Salle. From there it takes about twenty minutes on foot to the office of the Open Court Publishing Company, to and from which he travelled every day. On my return to Tokyo, I went to visit Dr.

<sup>1</sup> The name La Salle derives from René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, a seventeenth century French explorer in North America, who is well known for his construction of Fort St. Louis on the Illinois river in 1682.

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Suzuki, and when I showed him the photograph of this house which I had taken at La Salle, he exclaimed, "Oh, that's it, that's it!" and pointed to the extreme right window on the second floor telling me that he used to live in that room facing north. The building, according to him, had then belonged to Mr. Ramsey, a caretaker in the Hegeler household, and looked little changed in sixty years. For a while he gazed at it nostalgically.

The photo shown on this page is of Mr. Hegeler's house. The Open Court Publishing Company still has its office on the first floor of this 116 year old, castle-like structure. It looks fairly dilapidated and stands in bare isolation from the neighboring houses. It is said that Dr. Carus and Daisetz used to work together in a semi-basement room of this house. When we called, Miss Elizabeth Carus, one of Dr. Carus's daughters, was absent, visiting Chicago; but in her place, Mr. Alvin Carus, one of her brothers, came out to receive us. When a friend of mine paid a visit to this place some years ago, he was fortunate enough to meet and talk with Miss Carus, who told him that Dr. Suzuki used to be called "Tei-san" (Dr. Suzuki's personal name in Japanese was "Teitarō") by the Carus family and that he was at that time very skilled in exercising on the iron-bar.

The bookshelves all around the walls of the office contained old philosophical works vividly reflecting the intellectual atmosphere of the world from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. I obtained here the reprinted editions of Lao-tze's *The Canon of Reason and Virtue* (Tao-tê-ching) and the *T'ai-shang Kan-yin Pien*. In this office, a young girl, a middle-aged lady, and two men were working efficiently. It was quite astonishing

to think of such activity going on inside this ghostly looking building.

Although it was a one-day visit to the modest town of La Salle, it was for me a memorable and fruitful experience.

### III

D. T. Suzuki's letters from La Salle addressed to his master, Shaku Sōyen, have already been published in Japanese in *Suzuki Daisetsu Zen Sensha*, Supplementary Volume. There are twelve letters in all, dated between January, 1898, and October, 1906, from Dr. Suzuki's 28th to his 36th years, and are preserved at the Tokeiji Temple in Kamakura. We can see in these letters his serious attitude towards life. As they are precious documents graphically revealing not only his daily activities but his inner thoughts of those days, let me quote from some of them.

Describing his daily life at La Salle, young Daisetz wrote in a letter dated June 11, 1898:

Every morning I go to the editorial office to translate the *Daijō Kishin Ron* (The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana); every afternoon and evening, I usually stay at home alone studying and doing research. When the weather is fine and I am in the mood, I go cycling about the suburbs and take pleasure in reading the books which I take with me in peaceful surroundings. These days I am leading a somewhat strange life, helping at times members of the family in menial work such as drawing water from the well, carting earth, going on errands to the grocery, chopping fire-wood and even cooking, if need be...<sup>1</sup>

The first English translation of the *Daijō Kishin Ron* was one of the remarkable accomplishments of young Daisetz at La Salle, and in view of the history of modern Buddhist studies, it ranks as a pioneering work by a Japanese scholar on the Buddhist scripture in Chinese. Concerning his work he says in the same letter:

The translation of the *Kishin Ron* is so difficult that at times I feel like

<sup>1</sup> 鈴木大拙の人と学問 "Suzuki Daisetz — the Man and His Scholarship." Supplementary Volume to *Suzuki Daisetz Zen Sensha* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1961), pp. 141-142.

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stopping. Truly it is an ordeal for me. As the Chinese translation of the Tang version, which I had asked a friend to send, reached me today, I am pleased to begin the comparison of the two versions. Although I have so far roughly translated the whole text, I presume the final form cannot appear unless and until all the manuscripts have been subjected to several more revisions and corrections. As I see it, although the *Kishin Ron*, from the philosophical point of view, may no longer be judged to be of much value today, from the subjective and religious viewpoints it is still a remarkable work, eternal and imperishable in value. I should say that those who from the current objective standpoint repudiate or defend it are not only ignorant of the purport of the *Kishin Ron*, but are oblivious of the historical development of world thought . . .<sup>1</sup>

In another letter dated October 23, 1898, he says on the same subject:

I am as ever feeling quite fine, whiling away my time doing I know not what in particular. I have submitted the English translation of the *Kishin Ron* to Dr. Carus, having copied it out meticulously. Although he says that he will go over it one of these days, I do not know for sure when he will actually do so, since his words are as unpredictable as the autumnal sky. It seems that I have to wait for the ripening of time as everything depends upon Heaven . . .<sup>2</sup>

The following year, 1899, he says in one of his letters dated July 3:

In a few days, I am leaving for Chicago to stay for about a month, in order to write the preface to my translation of the *Kishin Ron* after referring to the *Tripitaka*. With this task, the whole project will be completed and ready for the printer.<sup>3</sup>

At this time, parallel to translation work, he was preparing to write the *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, which was published later. This was an ambitious and epoch-making work to be undertaken in English by a young Japanese Buddhist scholar, for such a work had not been previously attempted. He referred to this project

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

in one of his letters dated November 21, 1899:

I have noted down the general scheme of something like an outline of Mahayana Buddhism to be finalized prior to my departure from this country. It is naturally a sort of memorandum of the general outline, and so it will have to be corrected in many places. I shall be very happy if it could be of use as a reference for you.<sup>1</sup>

While engaged in the work of the Open Court Publishing Company, he seems to have acquired the practical knowledge needed for the publication of books and magazines. His writing activities in later years, and especially the publication of *The Eastern Buddhist* at Otani University, can be said to have had their inception at La Salle. In his letter dated June 10, 1900 he says:

Incidentally, I have learnt to use the typewriter recently. Sometimes I do some work with it for Dr. Carus. Please understand that I am not bothered about the kind of work I do at present, for everything serves to earn my livelihood. . . . Recently as the proofreader or clerk of the editorial room of the Open Court Publishing Company resigned, Dr. Carus told me to replace him. Although I do not know how much I will be paid for this since I have never asked him, I am sure I shall receive some remuneration. As I have to work six hours a day, my time for study is inevitably cut short. . . .<sup>2</sup>

He describes his daily life at the office thus:

It is not my task to write for the Open Court regularly. When there is need for a review concerning Japan or for an essay related to Buddhism, only then do I take up my pen upon the request of Dr. Carus. My position in this Company is that of proofreader proper, who, mediating between printers and writers, is engaged in every task relating to the dictionary, finding misplaced words and blanks, lengthening or shortening sentences, or making corrections in spelling, etc. Whereas it is a slightly better position than that of a Japanese proofreader, it is the same in its slavish nature. At the moment, I am not paid at all, as I am still on probation. . . .<sup>3</sup>

As the late Dr. R. H. Blyth said, it is true that Dr. Suzuki rarely

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-159.

<sup>3</sup> Dated Aug. 9, 1900; *ibid.*, p. 161.

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mentioned women except in his later years when he often referred to the significance of femininity in Buddhism in contrast to Christianity, representing masculinity. He expressed, however, his views on women and family life without reserve in one of his youthful letters dated June 11, 1898:

What puzzles me is being in the company of women and chatting with them. Topics on learning are all right, but it is least suited for me to speak with them on things miscellaneous, trifling and worldly. In Japan you may get along with them nicely without speaking a word, but here in America as it is customary to curry favor with women somehow or other, it is extremely hard for me to play something close to flattery. Accordingly, I make it a rule to confine myself within the house, reading or sitting in meditation. It seems to me that the saying, "Don't become too intimate with women and unenlightened men," has not changed in the past one thousand years. Even if educated to some degree, a woman is still a woman. Indeed, there are very few average women who distinguish themselves in realizing the virtues required of the female sex. As it is a general practice here to make much of women indiscriminately, there are more opportunities for women to enhance their virtue as well as to expose their shortcomings. Thus it can be said that nobody can escape from having both merits and demerits. Whereas Japanese women seem to be too obedient and soft, the arrogance and self-conceit shown by women here are just vexatious, if not detestable...

Since I arrived here I have gradually come to feel the beauty unique to the parent-child relationship in Japanese families. Though the love of mother for her child is the same all over the world, that between parents and children is fairly cold here, and only the love between the sexes is made much of. The tendency that those who are kind to their wives rather than those who are filial to their parents are more commended appears strange in the eyes of an Easterner. And yet it is customary for young girls here to choose their boy friends for themselves rather than being subservient to their parents' opinion. They are inclined to be highly independent, but the lack of soft and mild feelings seems to be common in the average person here.<sup>1</sup>

I am rather inclined to prefer celibacy to married life. This may sound rather awkward in view of the fact that I have never had time enough to think about this problem, but there is no reason why everybody should marry by all means, nor is there any necessity to do so on my part.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>2</sup> Dated Jan. 4, 1900; *ibid.*, p. 154.

His basic views on life in general and family life in particular can be seen in the following:

... Why should I crave for personal honor? I only wish that I may realize the true meaning of life, by fulfilling whatever duty I feel compelled to do. I have already severed my relation to the Almighty Dollar, and feel inclined to forsake the thought of family entanglements. Incidentally, as for family life, marriage and love, I have my own theory. I hope to tell you of my views on this subject at some other time. These two things, the Almighty Dollar and family life, are the most binding (although this term may not be proper, I use it tentatively) in the world, and so I have already detached myself from them and I am prepared to devote all my energy to other matters...<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the copious writings he produced thereafter, we learn that his statements proved accurate with the exception of his marriage to Miss Beatrice Erskine Lane. Its validity, however, is attested by the fact that the keynote of their married life lay in their co-operative study and spreading of Buddhist truth.

It is noteworthy that the thought of death seems to have been an undercurrent to his philosophical activities at this time, for he writes:

The word "death" indeed arouses in me infinite thoughts and feelings. I still cannot forget the great, subjective impact that my mother's death had upon me. Whenever I think of it, I cannot but shudder. I am not afraid of death, for I realized, by the experience of my own illness some time ago, that death was nothing. It is said that the blow of death terminates everything, but our mind is never halted by this fact, and this restlessness drives us into the realm of philosophy or religion. Nothing makes man more serious than the word "death"...<sup>2</sup>

In these words we find an unmistakable correspondence with the statements on the theme of death which he often made in his later years. He was invariably fond of quoting, in his speeches and writings, especially towards the end of his life, Shidō Bunan Zenji's *waka*, which declares: "While alive, be dead, thoroughly dead; do

<sup>1</sup> Dated Aug. 9, 1900; *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

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as you will, and all is right."<sup>1</sup> Here we find that during his subsequent years of study in Buddhist philosophy, the negative "death" has undergone a radical transformation in him into a positive "death." His life was indeed one in which this positive "death" continued to play a most vital role.

What was, then, the basic thought that enabled him to endure his ten years' stay at La Salle, during which he must have faced the loneliness of a solitary man, anxiety for the future, and the monotony of life as a menial worker? Contrary to what might be supposed, his firm but peaceful inner thoughts are vividly described in another of his letters dated June 10, 1900:

*Innen* (karmic relations) are indeed beyond our thought. An idea that has no immediate effect, after being received by somebody may later be of help to him in entering the Way of Enlightenment — all of a sudden flashing across his mind. The old Buddhist saying "The merit of hearing the Buddha's teaching, even once, is infinite, even if one falls short of believing it" refers to this truth. I am not particularly fond of argument, but as I am firmly convinced of the above-mentioned truth, I express my thoughts occasionally. It is my secret wish that, if my thoughts are beneficial to the progress of humanity, good fruits will, without fail, grow from them in the future... Thus it seems that the path which truth takes appears independent of and almost in defiance of man's influence. And it is precisely because of my belief in this truth that I attempt to express my conviction for the general public. It is by no means for taking pride in showing off my own views to the world, but because I am fully convinced that, even though untruth may be mixed with what I say, the modicum of truth contained in my views, just like the parable of a grain of wheat mentioned in the Bible, is sure to grow steadily to cover the whole of heaven and earth. This is because truth is neither owned by me nor by others, independent of all, through and through, and yet the one thing to be followed equally by others as well as by myself...<sup>2</sup>

His early life at La Salle was firmly sustained by his strong conviction of the eternal duration of truth born of his ardent *bodhi-citta* aspiring to share truth with all humanity. Young as he was, he suc-

<sup>1</sup> *The Eastern Buddhist*, I, No. 2 (September 1966), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> "Suzuki Daisetz — the Man and His Scholarship." pp. 156-157.

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ceeded in discovering peace of mind amidst adversity in the firm belief that the fruit was already inherent in the seed, in his everyday work in La Salle, however trifling it may have appeared.