

D. T. Suzuki as a Philosopher

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THE TITLE ABOVE may perhaps seem strange to the reader accustomed to thinking of D.T. Suzuki solely as a Buddhist scholar or interpreter of Mahayana teachings, especially Zen. To be sure, he was not a philosopher in the sense that he devoted himself to creating and developing a system of philosophy of his own. But in addition to being a religious personality of great stature, he was, in a broader and indeed unique sense, a philosopher not only in the bent of his mind but also in the attitude of his lifelong scholarly activities.

In addressing myself to a few aspects of this subject, I would first like to consider some of the circumstances surrounding his early introduction to philosophy as well as his entrance into religion. In both there can be little doubt that the death of his mother was the decisive factor. In one of his letters to his master Shaku Sōyen of the Engaku-ji, dated 1899, the twenty-nine year old Suzuki, then studying in La Salle, wrote that

The single word "death" truly evokes in me an emotion beyond measure. The great shock my mother's death caused is ever fresh in my memory. I never call it to mind without a tremor passing through me. I don't mean by that that death is something dreadful to me. Death itself is rather a trifling thing—this I just realized during my recent severe illness. Death—as they say—puts an end to everything. But I don't feel that way. Instead, it urges me irresistibly to philosophy, to religion. Nothing has more power than the word "death" to make man turn to his true face.¹

¹ *Suzuki Daisetz Zenshū* (Complete Works of Suzuki Daisetz), vol. 30, p. 214; hereafter cited as *SDZ*.

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In a reminiscence of Sōyen written in 1920, he wrote:

I lost my mother in my twentieth year. It made me reflect deeply on the problem of death and, in connection with that, the problem of "unbornness." I can remember now how the sense of incomprehensibility awakened in me a strong appetite for inquiry, and how the conviction that my mother is ever with me, unborn and undying, predominated over the sorrow of bereavement.²

Even after her death, Suzuki cherished a deep love for his mother. His filial piety was much in excess of the usual. Her death must have been a serious shock to him.

Philosophically, however, I think its deep impact served to jar him forever free of any tendency he might have had to implicit faith in the world or dimension of consciousness. The conscious world, on which he had until then depended unquestioningly, now became doubtful and undependable. Yet instead of bringing about emotional confusion or anxiety in him, it made him gain an awareness of something finally real and fundamental, an awareness of a firm and unshakable kind. As he himself said, this awareness or conviction prevailed over his deep sorrow. We may well call his experience an "ontological shock," for it broke him free of a complacent consciousness and gave him for the first time a glimpse of the final reality within it.

Retreat to his previous attitude was no longer possible. Now it was imperative for him to break through the wavering in his consciousness and actually penetrate to the unshakable bottom of the finally real. This he resolved to do, and the same resolve urged him on, he said, to philosophy and religion. We see in this something equivalent to the *hasshin*, arousing of mind to *bodhi*, of Buddhist masters throughout the past. There is, at the same time, another thing we cannot overlook, namely, that philosophy and religion are inseparable, at least at their point of departure. They have a common barrier to get over in their attachment to the dimension of consciousness. (This feature we find also in the basic orientation of thought of Nishida Kitarō, the first and most creative philosopher of twentieth century Japan, and a close friend of Suzuki's since their schooldays in Kanazawa.)

² *Ibid.*, vol. 28, p. 129.

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In order to get over this barrier, Suzuki devoted himself to Zen. He had no doubt found Zen discipline, which he had already begun practicing in the years preceding his mother's death, the most dependable. After an intensive, five-year Zen quest under master Sōyen, Suzuki was acknowledged as having achieved *kenshō* (seeing into one's nature); he was past the barrier and standing firmly on the unshakable ground of ultimate reality.

A few words in passing should be made on the method he used to achieve his goal. Suzuki personally resorted to Zen because of its known effectiveness in disciplining students. Needless to say, the Zen way of training inquirers must have been a major reason why he was so devoted in his endeavors to acquaint the West with Zen. Despite this, he stopped short of asserting that Zen was indispensable for achieving the breakthrough into ultimate reality. What practice to choose was after all a personal matter. One thing he emphasized as being absolutely necessary for the philosophical as well as religious quest is an intense burning of the will on the inquirer's part which strives to break through consciousness and reach the ultimate ground. He stresses the point that only this unquenchable inquiring spirit is essential and that all other elements are, in the last analysis, subordinate to it. We can discern in this the sober reflection and open-mindedness of the philosopher.

II

I remember an observation the philosopher Shimomura Toratarō once made concerning Suzuki's contribution to the study of Zen, which he contrasted to the contributions of Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime.³ According to Shimomura, both Nishida and Tanabe devoted themselves to the logical expression of the oriental concept of nothingness, especially as that concept is found in Zen. Nishida's achievement is particularly noteworthy. It is a monumental system of philosophy which attempts the logical reconstruction of the thought of nothingness and is developed in a most thoroughgoing way. In contrast to this, Suzuki's efforts were concentrated on presenting Zen as psychology, that is, experience and life. In the same essay, Shimomura emphasizes that the presentation

³ Shimomura Toratarō, "Dr. Suzuki's Place in the History of Thought," *Suzuki Daisetsu Senshū* (Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki), Bekkan, pp. 7-23.

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of Zen as psychology did not mean the psychological interpretation of Zen. Suzuki himself, he argued, strictly rejected such an interpretation and endeavored solely to disclose the aspect of Zen as inner experience.

Shimomura's view is generally true of Suzuki's works in his former period, especially of the three volumes of his *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. This, however, does not mean Suzuki rejected indiscriminately all forms of psychological explanation. He gave much attention to theories and hypotheses which were intended to shed light on religious experience, and made use of them insofar as they were meaningful or helpful to that end. To William James and C. G. Jung he was especially sympathetic. During his career as an educator he frequently made reference to them in the classroom. Even so, he did not forget to make their limitations clear. What he decidedly rejected was the attempt to explain away Zen experience by means of psychology as a science. I remember him saying many years ago, "What I always try to do is to keep 'religious psychology' distinct from the psychology of religion." What he meant by "religious psychology" was the description of religious life, including experience, in its natural development. What Shimomura called "presenting Zen as psychology" may be said to coincide with Suzuki's meaning of "religious psychology."

What value do Suzuki's descriptive works have philosophically? This is a question we cannot evade. Briefly, we may say that on the way to the proper understanding of Zen there are two things to be done in advance. One is to purge Zen of every kind of plausible interpretation from without, philosophical as well as psychological; this includes pantheism, monism, mysticism, and so forth. The other is to present the bare facts of Zen experience and life. Unless these two are judiciously and thoroughly carried out, no further project that is philosophically meaningful is conceivable. Suzuki possessed just the right credentials for attempting this. He was, moreover, able to accomplish his goals with great effectiveness.

III

I would now like to say something about the "former period" of Suzuki's career alluded to before. Around the year 1939, we see Suzuki's scholarly interest gradually enter a new phase. During that momentous year of his life his wife Beatrice, who had long been an indispensable associate in his work, died following a long illness. During this period his elaborate

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study of Bankei that had been started some two years earlier was also brought to completion. Bankei's personal warmth, kindness, and patience in instructing others must have made a profound impression on Suzuki amid the grief of having been preceded by his wife. More than that, immensely meaningful was Bankei's Zen awakening and his teaching of the "Unborn."

By his own account, Bankei had an inexpressibly bitter struggle for enlightenment that lasted over ten years. It included zazen, recitation of nembutsu, and even ascetic practices such as fasting and living with beggars. Finally, in a single instant of thought he attained his enlightenment of the Unborn. In his old age, looking back over those long years of struggle and perseverance, Bankei stated that they were after all nothing but a waste of labor (J., *mudabone*).⁴ All the sermons he made and the personal instruction he gave to monk and layman alike may be said to have been for the sole purpose of saving others from a similar waste of effort. In reference to this Suzuki writes in a moving passage:

Bankei constantly speaks of *mudabone*. For Bankei, in the enlightened and fully matured state of his later years, it may well be a waste. But without a waste of this kind, Bankei would have never been Bankei. In one sense, what an offhanded word it is! If you can affirm all he has said, just as it is, everything will be well with you. So easy! That, however, is not the whole truth. The swimming of a waterfowl [that is, Bankei] looks effortless and natural, yet would not have been possible without an accumulation of really indescribable effort. That is not to be forgotten. Without the exertion of *mudabone*, who would be able to achieve anything worthwhile? Bankei, good-natured Bankei! Out of your compassion and nothing else you have given us such kind-hearted utterances. I find myself shedding tears of emotion.⁵

In 1963, while I was visiting Suzuki at Karuizawa, he described to me the state of mind he was in at the time he wrote this passage: "I felt the huge mass of stones that I had piled up through many years of diligence and perseverance fall away in a moment (with the sound of) *gwara, gwara*."

⁴ D. T. Suzuki (ed.), *Bankei Zenji Goroku* (Sayings of Zen Master Bankei), pp. 42-7.

⁵ SDZ, vol. 1, p. 10.

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I found myself in the unconditionally restful state of mind of *sono-mama* or *as-it-is-ness*." It would be no exaggeration to say that at that time Suzuki found himself in the state of *sono-mama* in a more thoroughgoing way than ever before.

Let me return to the term Unborn. It is an old and commonly used word that recurs again and again in Mahayana texts. As such it has been familiar to Buddhists throughout the ages, though they have perhaps not given it much special notice. Religiously and philosophically examined, however, the term Unborn contains within it something of immense meaning, indicating as it does the negation of the "bornness" of birth. By "bornness" I mean the tacit acceptance of being born in the world and submitted to the conditions of existence in it, to its distinctions and discriminations. Although this tacit acceptance is left unquestioned in the shadow of ignorance, in the last analysis, human suffering of every kind originates here. It is the dead ground, so to speak, in the quest for emancipation. The Unborn is able to strike the bornness unexpectedly and break its darkness away. This is the significance of the Unborn.

Bankei resorted exclusively to the teaching of the Unborn as a tool for instructing others. He used it most wonderfully and effectively. Through him the Unborn truly became "most illuminating and emancipating."

According to Suzuki, Bankei's Unborn is equivalent to Lin-chi's "There is nothing much in Huang-po's Buddha Dharma," or to Shin Buddhists' "*namu-amida-butsu*," in being the expression of absolute affirmation. Nevertheless, if it lacks clarity of thought, the phrase will finally be nothing more than a meaningless utterance. Bankei's teaching of the Unborn is much more than that, however. It has philosophical incisiveness, depth, and validity—in a word, power of thought that goes beyond the limits of situation. Here we see the salient feature of Bankei's Zen which makes it distinct from other Zen masters.⁶ This is why Suzuki was so impressed with Bankei's Zen teaching and thought. It led him to a rediscovery of Zen thought in general.

As stated above, the few years around 1939 see both the deepening of Suzuki's inner life (*kyōgai*) in the wake of his wife's death and his rediscovery of Bankei's Unborn Zen. We may even say that these few years divide his scholarly activities into two periods, if we bear in mind that from

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14 ff.

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that time on his chief emphasis was on the various aspects of Zen thought and the thought of other Buddhist schools.

IV

Suzuki was as prolific as ever in his latter period, but the major emphasis of his study was, as mentioned above, shifted to the thought of the various schools of Mahayana Buddhism, especially the Zen and Pure Land traditions. My intention here, however, is limited to examining a few cases of his interpretations of this thought, which I think are typical of his method of interpreting and as such should be meaningful from a philosophical point of view.

First comes *prajñā* intuition, what he calls the "logic of *soku-hi*."⁷ This he derived from a group of similar predications in the Diamond Sutra as the most telling formulation of the logic underlying *prajñā* experience. For example, we read in that sutra: "What the Tathāgata has taught as *prajñāpāramitā* is really not *prajñāpāramitā*, therefore it is *prajñāpāramitā*." Suzuki reformulated it as: "A is not A, therefore A is A." In other words, the law of self-identity is negated, and through this negation it is absolutely affirmed. Why, then, is the law of self-identity to be negated? Because it is the logic underlying the implicit faith in consciousness, the standpoint of distinction and discrimination (*ishiki no tachiba*). It is because of this that it must be negated, that is, it must be broken through. When this breakthrough is actually achieved, absolute affirmation takes place for the first time.

The logic of *soku-hi* thus proves to be the logic of *prajñā* experience. Zen, however, does not resort to such abstract forms of expression. It is direct, point-blank, and demonstrative. Suzuki sometimes referred to this well-known case involving the Zen master Yüeh-shan. When Yüeh-shan was sitting in meditation, a monk came to him and asked, "Sitting immovably, what are you thinking now?" The master replied, "I am thinking about something unthinkable." The monk asked again, "How do you think the unthinkable?" The master cried, "Not thinking!"⁸ According to Suzuki, Yüeh-shan's first comment refers to the negation, "A is not A," and the second to absolute affirmation, "A is A." Yüeh-

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 971 ff.

⁸ *Ch'uan-teng lu* (*Daimōroku; Transmission of the Lamp*), 14.

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shan's "not thinking" is indeed an expression of absolute affirmation, as is Bankei's Unborn and the Pure Land devotee's "*namu-amida-butsu*."

I would next like to mention Suzuki's reference to three facets of Zen experience or Zen consciousness: operation (用 *yū*), as-it-is-ness (只没 *shimo*), and cognizance (見 *ken*).⁹

Operation. One of the Zen transmission gathas reads as follows:

Mind operates in response to the change of situation,
And its way of operating is exquisitely wonderful.
Recognize nature in its flowing process,
And there will be neither pleasure nor fear for you.

This gatha, Suzuki says, is expressive of what the operation aspect is like, especially its naturalness, non-purposiveness, and freedom from attachment. To make the point clearer he quotes these words of P'an-shan Pao-chi:

It may be compared to a sword flung in the air. Whether it will reach its destination or not is no longer a question. Its arc in the air leaves no trace. The sword blade is unnicked. If the mind is thus detached from discrimination at each moment, the entire mind is the Buddha; the entire Buddha is the person; there is no difference between person and Buddha. Here is the Way.¹⁰

As-it-is-ness. In his *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Second Series (London, 1933), Suzuki extensively discusses as-it-is-ness (*sono-mama*) in terms of passivity with references to the Pure Land Buddhist masters and Christian mystics. But in his essay, "Zen after Hui-neng,"¹¹ he applies the Chinese term *chih-mei* (只没 *shimo*) to it. He sees one of its loftiest expressions in Chao-chou's "Above and under heaven I alone am noble!" and in the Japanese Zen master Bunan's poem:

While living, be a dead man,
Be thoroughly dead—
Behave as you like,
And all will be right.

⁹ *SDZ*, vol. 2, p. 389 ff.

¹⁰ *SDZ*, vol. 2, p. 400.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 403 ff.

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To be thoroughly dead while living accurately describes as-it-is-ness detached from all purposiveness and contrivance of any kind. As-it-is-ness is thus the unfathomable depth from which wells up the wonderful operation of the unattached mind.

Cognizance. In discussing the aspect of cognizance of Zen experience, Suzuki is careful to stress its difference from the perceptive or cognitive experience of psychological or epistemological dimensions. A passage from the T'ang priest Shen-hui's sayings which he quotes in "Zen after Hui-neng" throws valuable light on this question:

A monk from Lu-shan named Chien asked: "A clear mirror is set high on a stand. It is ready to reflect every object. Every object that appears before it is reflected without fail. What about this?"

The master replied, "Sages from ancient times have regarded this as wonderfully expressive. Within this school, however, it is not approved as wonderful. Why? The reason is this: It is true that a clear mirror is able to reflect every object. But what is truly wonderful is that every object is not mirrored in it."¹²

Suzuki comments on this. "Shen-hui's dictum 'What is truly wonderful is that every object is not mirrored in it,' makes admirably clear what the absolute knowledge [of Zen experience] is. When an object is reflected in the mirror, it is no more absolute knowledge but the knowledge of the world of discrimination. When the image of the object has not appeared in it, yet even so there is the clear flash of self-knowledge prior to the appearance of the image—this is the most wonderful of all wonderful things."¹³

V

I will make only brief mention of the interpretative works of Suzuki's later years which deal with Chinese Zen masters before and after Hui-neng, especially Lin-chi and Chao-chou, and with Japanese Zen masters such

¹² *Shen-hui lu (Jinno-roku; Collected Sayings of Shen-hui)*, 32; quoted in *SDZ*, vol. 2, p. 425.

¹³ *SDZ*, *ibid.*

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as Dōgen, Daitō, Bassui, Hakuin, and myōkōnin of the Pure Land school such as Asahara Saiichi. Suzuki's philosophizing activities in his latter period take the form of interpretative works dealing with various aspects of Mahayana Buddhist thought. In this connection we are reminded of Dōgen's use of the terms *sangaku* 参學 and *sankyū* 参究. Although semantically, *sangaku* means "to go and study," *sankyū* "to go and scrutinize," Dōgen uses them in his own particular sense. Here is a passage from *Shōbōgenzō sansuikyō*:

Water is neither hard nor soft, neither wet nor dry, neither moving nor still, neither cold nor warm, neither existent nor nonexistent, neither awakened nor deluded. Frozen, it is harder than diamond. Who could smash it? Melted, it is softer than milk. Who could break it? This being so, there can be no doubt about the merits actually embodied and retained in it. Go and study the time in which one looks around the water of the ten directions. It is not limited to the going-and-studying of human or celestial beings looking at water. We also have the going-and-studying of water looking at water itself. As water practices to be water and testifies to itself, we have the going-and-scrutinizing of water in which water makes an utterance of water itself.

Here "study" is not merely the process of turning the unknown into the known. It rather means "rediscover" or "make the recognition anew." "My study" is at the same time the "self-study" of the object of my study. The same holds true for "scrutinize" as well.

This is just what Suzuki achieved through his voluminous interpretative works. He keenly discerned the truly creative and valuable in the object of study and contemplated it in a broader perspective. He gave new meaning and expression to it. Lending wing to it he let it soar high again in the present-day world. This was both his way of interpreting and his way of philosophizing.

The views of D. T. Suzuki as I have roughly outlined them above may be said, from the viewpoint of Zen experience, to shed valuable light on problems concerning the basic ground of human knowledge, behavior, and existence.