

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Emptiness is Suchness

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BUDDHISTS EMPHASIZE "emptiness" and say that everything is empty. Although this is a very important point for Buddhism in general and for Zen in particular, I am afraid that it is quite misleading, or at least very difficult to understand, particularly for the Western mind. So I think that "everything is empty" may be more adequately rendered in this way: "Everything is just as it is." A pine tree is a pine tree; a bamboo is a bamboo; a dog is a dog; a cat is a cat; you are you; I am I; she is she. Everything is different from everything else. And yet, while everything and everyone retain their uniqueness and particularity, they are free from conflict. This is the meaning of the saying that everything is empty.

A pine tree has no sense of superiority over bamboo; bamboo has no sense of inferiority to a pine tree. A dog has no sense of superiority over a cat, a cat no sense of inferiority to a dog. We human beings may think that plants and animals entertain such thoughts, but this is merely a projection of human capacities onto the nonhuman dimension. In fact plants and animals do not have such a mode of consciousness; they just live naturally, without any sense of evaluation. But human beings are different: we often think of ourselves in comparison to others. Why is he so intelligent? Why am I not as gifted? Why is she so beautiful? Why am I not as beautiful? Some feel superior to others while some feel inferior.

This is because, unlike plants and animals, we human beings have self-consciousness. Because we are self-conscious we look at ourselves from the outside, through comparison with others. Although we are "self" we are not

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really "self" because it is from the outside that we look at ourselves. In our daily life, there are moments when we are "here" with ourselves—moments in which we feel a vague sense of unity. But at other moments we find ourselves "there"—looking at ourselves from the outside.

We fluctuate between here and there from moment to moment: homeless, without any place to settle. Within ourselves there is always a gap. On the other hand, plants and animals are just as they are because they have no self-consciousness; they cannot look at themselves from the outside. This is the essential difference between human beings and other living beings.

This characteristic of human beings has a positive aspect. Since we have self-consciousness and are always thinking of something, we can plan, reflect, conceive ideals, and can thus create human culture, science, art, and so forth. We are living while thinking how to live, how to develop our lives. This positive aspect, however, is at the same time quite problematic, because, as I mentioned above, through self-consciousness we look at ourselves from the outside. We are thus separated from ourselves. We are here and there, there and here. We are constantly moving between here and there, between inside and outside. This is the reason for our basic restlessness, or fundamental anxiety, which plants and animals do not have. Only human beings are not "just as they are."

D. T. Suzuki often talks about "suchness" or "as-it-is-ness." Plants and animals are living in their "suchness." But we human beings are separated from our suchness, are never "just as-we-are." So far as we are moving between here and there, between inside and outside, looking at ourselves in comparison with others, and looking at ourselves from the outside, we are always restless. This restlessness or anxiety is not accidental to man, that is, peculiar to some individuals and not others. It is not that some have this inner restlessness while others do not. Insofar as one is a human being, he cannot escape this basic anxiety. In fact, strictly speaking, it is not that one *has* this anxiety, but rather that one *is* this anxiety.

How can we overcome this fundamental restlessness and return to suchness? To do so is the *raison d'être* and essential task of religion.

According to Genesis, whenever God created something, he saw that it was good. When God created Adam and Eve, he blessed them and saw that they were good. Do you think that the term "good" in this context is meant in the merely ethical sense? My answer would be no. When God saw that his creation was good, he was not referring to the merely ethical dimension. Rather he was indicating that all of creation is ontologically good, or, to use D. T. Suzuki's term, that all of creation is in "suchness."

God created a tree just as a tree, and saw that it was good. It is in "suchness" as a tree. He created a bird—a bird is really a bird, not a fish. When he created a fish, it is really a fish—very different from a bird. Everything is in its own

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"suchness." When he created Adam and Eve, just like the plants and animals and so forth, Adam is really Adam, Eve is really Eve. Adam is good. Eve is good. They are just as they are, respectively and equally. They thus symbolize the Original (True) Nature of Man.

But according to Genesis, Adam and Eve ate the apple of knowledge—the apple of knowing good and evil. Does this indicate good and evil only in the ethical sense? The story in my opinion illustrates far more than that. The eating of the apple suggests the making of value judgments. You may say, for instance, "Today we have good weather, though yesterday we had bad weather," or "This is a good road, but that one is bad." Here, the terms good and evil can be made to apply to the weather, the road conditions, etc. It is in this broader sense of knowing good and evil that the apple of knowledge symbolizes the ability to make value judgments.

The ability to make value judgments is the unique attribute of self-consciousness. With self-consciousness one can judge "This is good" or "That is bad" and so forth. In this way we make a distinction between this and that. We love this and hate that, pursue this and avoid that. Through this capacity for making distinctions, people come to be involved in attachment. Love is a positive attachment. Hate is a negative attachment. By making distinctions, we come to like some things and dislike others. And in this way we become attached to some things and reject others—rejection being the negative form of attachment. We are involved in and confined by our attachment. This is the result of having self-consciousness.

Through self-consciousness, we also make a distinction between our self and others. As a consequence of this distinction, we attach to the self, making ourselves the center of the world. We become involved in and limited by the distinction between self and others, the duality between love and hate, and so forth. Distinction turns into opposition, conflict, and struggle as soon as the distinction becomes an object of attachment.

But this is not the state of man's original nature. As God saw, Adam is good and Eve is good, just as plants and animals in their original state are good. Fundamentally everything in the order of original creation is good.

Thus the question is how can we return to that original goodness, our original suchness? I think Christianity has its own answer to this question. In Christianity self-consciousness as the result of eating the apple of knowledge is regarded as "sin" because eating the apple constitutes rebellion against the word of God who said, "Thou shalt not eat." It is through the reunion of man and God by virtue of Jesus Christ's redemptive love that man can return to his original suchness. In Buddhism self-consciousness is regarded as "ignorance" because in self-consciousness we lose the reality of "suchness" and are limited by our outsider view of things in the universe. As such we view even ourselves from the

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outside. This outsider view of our self comprises the fundamental ignorance inherent in human existence.

Trying to grasp one's self by one's self from the outside may be compared to the metaphor of a snake swallowing its own tail. When the snake bites its tail, it makes a circle. And the more it tries to swallow its tail, the smaller that circle becomes. When the snake carries this effort to swallow its own tail to its final conclusion, the circle turns into a small dot and finally, it must disappear into emptiness. More concretely, the snake must die through this effort. As long as the human self *tries* to grasp itself through self-consciousness (out of which evolves inferiority or superiority, etc.), the human ego-self falls into an ever-deepening dilemma. At the extreme point of this dilemma, the ego can no longer support itself and must collapse into emptiness. When the attempt of self-consciousness to grasp itself is pressed to its ultimate conclusion the human ego must die. The realization of no-self is a necessity for the human ego. Someone may realize the necessity of confronting this dilemma only on his deathbed. But others may existentially intuit the need for resolving this dilemma even while quite young, and thus embark on the religious quest. In any event, the realization of no-self is a "must" for the human ego. We must realize that there is no unchanging, eternal ego-self.

It is essential that one faces this dilemma and breaks through it, in order to realize emptiness or suchness. This realization of emptiness is the liberation from that dilemma which is existentially rooted in human consciousness. Awakening to emptiness, which is disclosed through the death of the ego, you realize your "suchness." This is because the realization of suchness is the positive aspect of the realization of emptiness.

In this realization you are no longer separated from yourself, but are just yourself, no more no less. There is no gap between you and yourself: you become you. When you realize your own suchness, you realize the suchness of everything at once. A pine tree appears in its suchness. Bamboo manifests itself in its suchness. Dogs and cats appear in their suchness as well. A dog is really a dog. No more no less. A cat is really a cat. No more no less. Everything is realized in its distinctiveness.

Then for the first time you come to understand the familiar Zen phrases, "Willows are green, flowers are red," or "The eyes are horizontal, the nose vertical." Trees, birds, fish, dogs or cats—from the beginning they always enjoy their suchness. Only man has lost that suchness. He is in ignorance. Therefore he does not know the reality of human life and becomes attached to his life and fears his death. But when ignorance is realized for what it is through the realization of no-self, one may awaken to "suchness," in which everything is realized in its uniqueness and particularity.

This is, however, not just a goal to be reached. It is rather the point of depar-

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ture for our life, for our real activity, for "suchness" is the *ground* of both our being and the world. Not sometime in the future, but here and now we can immediately realize "suchness," because we are never separated from "suchness" even for a moment. It is the ground to which we must return and from which we must start. Without the realization of suchness as our ground or as our point of departure, our life will be restless and groundless. Once we return to that point of suchness, everything is realized in its distinctiveness. The distinctions between self and other, good and evil, life and death, are *regrasped* in the new light of "suchness." Accordingly, it becomes the real point of departure for our lives and for our activity. Then, however rich or poor our ability may be, we display that ability in its fullness just as it is, without being entangled by any sense of inferiority or superiority. If you have three-power or five-power or eight-power or ten-power ability, you display your own power just as it is, at any moment, according to the given situation, and can create something new. You can live your life really and fully without creating conflict with others, so that everyday is a good day. This is what is meant by the saying "everything is empty."