

ARTICLES

FEATURE:

D. T. SUZUKI TODAY,
FORTY YEARS FROM HIS PASSING

The Life of a Certain Person

D. T. SUZUKI

My Life Begins

ALTHOUGH I am not a person to believe in Destiny, or at least I am not one who insisted on Destiny as all powerful, after contemplating at length the life of a certain person, I have come to the conclusion that the greater part of the things that occur in any person's life cannot be laid down to their free will. Consider these things, for instance: Was my birth due to my will? Was it by my will that I would insist on these two particular persons to be my parents when I was born into this world? Was it by my will that I was born in a certain town in Kanazawa in Kaga [present-day Ishikawa Prefecture], in the country of Japan? If I could take the heart that I have now and replace it with the one I had then, it might well be that rather than having myself born to the impoverished Suzuki family, I would have preferred to be born to a wealthy family, and rather than being born in a remote corner of the world like Kanazawa, I would have preferred to have been born in the center of a city like London or Paris. If this were the case, I might not be what I am today, a person who, with no real choice in the matter, simply relays bits of second-hand knowledge. At any rate, in my debut in this world, all of this was decided without the least bit of dependence on my will.

* This piece was originally published as *Hito no isshō* 人の一生 (The life of a certain person) in *Shin Bukkyō* 新仏教 (New Buddhism) 15, no. 4, pp. 283–85 (April 1914). It was later included in a collection of the author's essays, *Kōjō no tetsui* 向上の鉄槌 (The iron mallet of self-improvement), Tokyo: Kōseikan Shoten, 1915. It can also be found in *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū* 鈴木大拙全集 Vol. 17, pp. 57–60. Copyright Matsugaoka Bunko.

If I were asked how I fared once I had made my debut, it was not by my free will that I chose my friends; this was decided by the fact that I was born into a certain place, and this condition there and then decided the friends who would surround me, as well as the school at which I would receive an education. While still a child, I lost my father, but losing my father was not something I ever thought I wanted to happen; to my child's mind, rather, it was my hope that my parents would be alive and with me all the time. Having lost our father, my brothers who were still young and my mother who knew nothing of the real world could find no means of supporting themselves due to the economic changes taking place at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. Our household naturally collapsed under the economic forces impinging upon it. There was no reason why I would have wished poverty upon myself.

After completing grade school, I was enrolled in the preparatory course for a *senmonkō* 専門校. The prefecture had another middle school, so why someone like myself should be selected for enrollment in this special course, was something I could not understand. While enrolled in the *senmonkō*, with the passing years it was not that a will that might be said to be free did not begin to emerge slowly. This will, however, cannot be called free will, for if there were an outward influence stronger than anything it had experienced up to now, it would adapt itself to the pressures, checks, and stimuli of its environment. Thus, it would have to be considered a will that acted in response to things.

The forces of my environment were a great many. However, for me there were no elders or seniors who tried to rein in my youthful spirit and bring it in line with convention; there were no companions with whom I could freely divulge my thoughts; indeed, no one came to my aid—to aid me spiritually or materially—and there was no one who helped me to carry out my will. In other words, I led an existence hemmed in by my environment as such, against which I put up the smallest line of resistance.

After that, I set off for Tokyo, as the time had come for me to get an education. But it was not that I was like everyone else in the world who wanted to make their way through life; I had not the least interest in making myself successful and famous. Instead, I went wherever my will took me, never learning what I needed to make a livelihood in society, as I had not the slightest interest in making a success of myself. While I indulged my free will, the reality was that I was responding to the forces in my environment, and my actions at that time were in fact rather mechanical.

Going Abroad

An opportunity (Destiny) totally beyond my power arose that led me to proceed overseas. If I knew then what I know now, it might not have been necessary for me to set out as recklessly as I did. It was all conceived and executed on the spur of the moment. More than ten years have passed since I made that decision; those years are as if they had never existed, my becoming a person living in the remote countryside was like being buried alive. While it may seem as if this period of my life was due to my free will, it might be better to say in truth that it was a result of my being in a situation where I was powerless to do anything.

While living abroad, there was nothing particular that I did, and again on the spur of the moment, I felt that it was time to return home, and so that is what I did. Until I was just about to return home, I had been penniless, and it was completely by coincidence that I came into funds that covered my travel expenses. From there, I went to many places and broadened my knowledge of the world somewhat. After returning, I was biding my time, when someone asked me if I would not apply for a teaching position. I had half a mind to go abroad again when I found out that the patron whom I could have turned to for funding had just died, and so that cinched my decision to remain in Japan.¹ Since I had to do something by way of making my livelihood, I was ready to do whatever came my way.

During this period, it would seem that I was freely selecting the things that I did, but as far as I was concerned there was nothing in my heart that I was aware of that approached free will. From the outset, I have always had a passive and meditative character, and am not good at initiating work on my own. Ultimately, it is possible to compare my life to this point to drifting clouds.

¹ The patron who supported Suzuki was probably Edward C. Hegeler (1835–1910), who died in June 1910, just a few months after Suzuki had returned to Japan. Hegeler was the father-in-law of Paul Carus who was married to his daughter Mary. A successful engineer, he was the publisher of the *Open Court* and *Monist* magazines to which Suzuki contributed articles and book reviews. It was probably Hegeler who gave Suzuki the funds he needed to travel through Europe on his journey home.

A Puppet on a String?

Though no one may have gone through life as I have lived it, by and large the life of a person is governed by a Destiny whose outcome we can only guess, as it dangles us about at whim, moving us hither and thither like a puppet on a string. Thus, there is a Great Will that presides in the heavens, a Great Will that regards us as little more than vessels or machines that it takes up in its service to achieve its goals. By contrast, such things as my small goals, of what value are they and what power do they manifest?

Viewing the matter from this perspective, the struggles of the world, the trials and tribulations of this dusty world, ah, how trivial they all seem.

Well, then, am I ultimately a kind of puppet on a string, or just a plaything of Destiny? That may be so if I see things from their inevitable conclusion, but “how” I see that conclusion I inevitably arrive at, this is what I must discuss, though it is something I will have to forego for the present.

Chuang-tzu

Chuang-tzu says:

Yu-tzu and Sang-tzu were friends. When a rain fell constantly for ten days, Yu-tzu said, “Oh dear, Sang-tzu is probably feeling poorly”, and so packing a lunchbox for him he went out. When he reached Sang-tzu’s gate, he could hear the strains of someone singing, weeping, and strumming the lute, saying: “Oh, Father, how could you! ... Oh, Mother, how could you! ... Tell me, O Heaven, was it you? ... Tell me, O fellow Man, was it you?” The voice seemed to be cracking under its own weight though it could still keep up with the lyrics. Yu-tzu went in and said, “Brother, those lyrics of yours, what brings you to sing them?” He said, “Well, seeing how poor I am, I was wondering who could have thrust me into these dire straits, and hadn’t arrived at an answer. Why would Father and Mother want me to be poor? The heavens above cover all impartially, the earth below supports all impartially; why would heaven and earth want me to be poor? Though I tried to find out who is behind this, I could not get an answer. And then it struck me: I know who put me in these dire straits, why, it must be Destiny!”²

² For a standard translation of the Chuang-tzu story related here, see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

SUZUKI: THE LIFE OF A CERTAIN PERSON

What is Destiny, then—does it mean knowing we cannot escape from it? If that is all there is to Destiny, then there is nothing more we can say about it. That might well be the case, but when we watch a bird take flight or a flower bloom, we sense in it something that moves ever so freely. If we could grasp the reason for that motion, would not that Destiny that heaven decrees be transformed into a destiny we would now command by our will as such?

What is it that runs on free will and turns on Destiny, yet does not obey the dictates of either one? Were I to name this mysterious force, I would call it *Maka fukashigi* 摩訶不可思議, “O Mystery!”

(Translated by Wayne S. Yokoyama)