

Reading D. T. Suzuki Today

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FROM Suzuki's close associate, I heard of a Western admirer who one day had found his way to Suzuki's *Eastern Buddhist* office at Otani University in the 1960s. Eager to discuss a point from a recent Suzuki article, the visitor pointed to a passage from that essay and produced a copy of another article from several years earlier in which Suzuki had said virtually the opposite. When he looked at the older text, Suzuki asked pointedly, "Did *I* write that?" The Suzuki of the 1960s was not the same as the Suzuki of the 1930s or 1940s or 1950s. So, why should one expect consistency in what the different Suzukis wrote? Mahāyāna Buddhism in general and Zen Buddhism in particular emphasize the spontaneity and fluidity of expression. This is the point of "situational effectiveness" (Jp. *hōben* 方便; Skt. *upāya*). The teacher adroitly adapts expression, both verbal and nonverbal, to the shifting conditions of context and audience. Indeed, we could even say that in this little exchange at Otani University, there were *three* Suzukis: the one from the 1950s who wrote the earlier essay, the one from some months before the encounter in Kyoto who had written the recent article, and the one engaging the visitor right then and there. The Westerner was ready to engage the ink spots on the page from the two essays, but was forgetting what Linji called "the true person without status," living and breathing right there in that room.¹

¹ Suzuki wrote a book in Japanese about Linji's view of the person, Suzuki 1949.

This little episode is relevant to the concern of this paper. I want to suggest D. T. Suzuki's corpus of writings² may have something special to say to many of us in the twenty-first century. Of course, the significance of a text or even the corpus of a writer's life-work only emerges from the engagement between the written page and its readers. The reader is inextricably part of a text's import. An unread book is as devoid of significance as an unwritten one. When we evaluate the value of a book or its writer, therefore, we readers entangle our own perceptions, values, assumptions, and agendas into the letters of the text. Among his generation of Japanese intellectuals, Suzuki was probably unique in how often he wrote in English for an intended Western audience. Over his six or seven decades of writing in English, it is not surprising that he found his Western audience bringing to his expositions different questions and different assumptions. Responsive to the changes in his readership and their contexts, he could say different things. For example, Suzuki wrote more extensively about Zen Buddhism's relation to "the unconscious" after his encounter with Erich Fromm³ in the 1960s than he did in the 1920s. This change was probably more a response to the shifting categories of his audience than a development in his own thought about Zen. In fact, I suspect in most ways D. T. Suzuki's understanding of Zen did not change much at all in the last half of his life. Yet, even if he did not change, as long as his audience was changing, the purport of his writings was also changing. So, before considering Suzuki's relevance to a twenty-first-century readership, let us consider some earlier contexts of reading Suzuki.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Suzuki's English-language readership knew little of Asian religion and thought. To the extent his readers knew of Buddhism at all, it was mostly Theravāda. Suzuki first came to the United States to accompany his Zen master, Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 (1859–1919), a participant in the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. Then, through Sōen's endorsement and encouragement, Suzuki returned for a more extended stay (1897–1909) under the sponsorship of Paul Carus. Paul Carus was the

² Throughout this article, I am focusing on the writings of Suzuki in English and their significance for the intended audience of Western readers. This is particularly apropos because this article appears in the *The Eastern Buddhist*, the English-language journal Suzuki founded as a vehicle for reaching a Western audience. I also refer throughout to "D. T. Suzuki" rather than the Japanese "Suzuki Daisetz," since the former was not only most often the name, but also, the persona of the man who wrote for Westerners. In other words, "Suzuki Daisetz" and "D. T. Suzuki" refer to the same man, but perhaps not always the same person, the same writer.

³ See Suzuki, Fromm, and DeMartino 1960.

founder of Open Court Press and editor of the philosophical journal, *The Monist*.⁴ There are two aspects of this context influential on Suzuki's writings from that time.

First, as a German philosopher who immigrated to the United States, Carus shared tendencies of the Euro-American intellectual climate of the time. Most importantly, with the British Pali Text Society, the London Buddhist Society, various Western Vedāntin groups, the Theosophists, and the Transcendentalists, he shared orientalist assumptions about the "ancient wisdom of the East." Like the others, he aided the translation of this ancient wisdom into Western languages. In the argot of today's post-colonial cultural theorists, this made Asian culture an object for the gaze of the Western eye. The "ancient wisdom of the East" was a culturally constructed object of desire for the Western orientalist.

More needs to be said, however. For many orientalists, this desire was not simply a libidinal appetite for titillation and control, but was also the respectful aspiration to emulate. We find such an aspiration in the youth who watches a great athlete and then goes to the playground day after day trying to imitate those moves. We find it in the college student who decides to become a scholar after taking an exciting seminar or hearing a provocative lecture. Carus's brand of orientalism linked itself to a thirst for personal spiritual transformation. For readers like Carus, the hope was that Westerners could learn from, as well as about, Asian thought. Throughout the rest of his life, I think, Suzuki tried to quench that thirst in his audience.

The second aspect of this early context for Suzuki's English writings was that from the start he saw himself as representing or even promoting Zen Buddhism in the West. After all, he came to America not as a scholar, but as a Zen master's student. To a great extent, especially in his English writings, he never abandoned that persona. This set him apart from many contemporaries. For example, Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949) also sometimes wrote in English, but his goal was different. He hoped to launch the field of religious studies in Japan and he wrote in English as a scholar of religion with

⁴ Carus had wanted Sōen to collaborate with him, but the Zen master had to attend to his own disciples and his temple, Engakuji 円覚寺, in Kamakura, Japan. When Suzuki arrived instead, it seems Carus understood Suzuki to be more of an assistant than collaborator, having him work in the garden and doing menial office work for the publisher. As time went on, Carus began to see the value of Suzuki as an intellectual resource and collaborated more directly with him. The shift in this relationship is readily visible in the Carus-Suzuki correspondence preserved in the Carus archives at Southern Illinois University.

expertise in Japanese Buddhism.⁵ The significance of this contrast is that although Suzuki's Western readers often thought of him as a Japanese *scholar* of Buddhism, that is not how he originally understood himself, particular as a writer in English. Suzuki was not a formally trained buddhologist. He studied more on his own than in the academy. He was the student of a Zen master, not the *deshi* 弟子 of a professor.

These two aspects of Suzuki's early context in the West presented special challenges. His orientalist supporters undoubtedly recognized differences among the various Asian civilizations in areas like language and history, for instance. Yet, when it came to the "ancient wisdom of the East," they often blurred Asia into a seamless whole. To them, Vedānta and (Theravāda) Buddhism, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Daodejing* 道德經 all pointed to the same transcendent reality and outlined basically the same program for spiritual transformation. This was a conundrum for Suzuki as an advocate of Zen Buddhism, a tradition about which his early readers knew almost nothing. On one hand, to catch the attention of his target audience, Suzuki had to make Zen fit the "ancient wisdom of the East" model. On the other hand, if he were going to promote Zen specifically, he had to convince that same audience that Zen was somehow special.

Suzuki's tactic was to begin with a distinction his audience already knew of: the difference between Mahāyāna and Theravāda. Most scholars and intellectuals of the time had understood this difference mainly as a distinction between two kinds of Indian Buddhism, a Sanskrit tradition and Pāli tradition. In writing about Mahāyāna, however, Suzuki could explicitly bring East Asian Buddhism into the analysis. His translation, *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, appeared in 1900 and his *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism* in 1907. This opened a space within which he could begin introducing the West to Zen. This was one purpose for his founding, upon returning to Japan, The Eastern Buddhist Society and the English-language journal, *The Eastern Buddhist*. By shifting his terminology from "Mahāyāna Buddhism" to "Eastern Buddhism," he was explicitly moving his discourse more directly into East Asia and more pointedly to the easternmost part of East Asia: Japan. Through his contacts with America, including the networking enabled by his wife, Beatrice Lane Suzuki, he could promote the further eastward expansion of Zen across the Pacific to America.

⁵ Anesaki's most famous books in English are Anesaki 1916 and Anesaki 1930.

By the 1920s, Japan had assumed a more visible role in global geo-politics. From as far back as the nineteenth-century European *japonisme* fad in painting, there had been a Western fascination with Japanese arts, an early outlet for Western orientalism. Japan's prominence as a modernizing Asian state in the 1920s, however, deepened the interest of many Westerners. In response, Suzuki could expand his Western readership from those interested in spiritual matters to those who wanted to know more about Japan, especially from a cultural or aesthetic point of view. Suzuki told this new audience that if you want to understand Japanese culture, you have to understand Zen. This was the context for his writing in English *Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture* in 1938.⁶ Eventually, though, as hostilities between Japan and the West increased, Suzuki's visibility in the West diminished. In fact, during the Pacific War, he wrote almost exclusively in Japanese for his compatriots.

The postwar period brought to Suzuki personal renown and success in his promotion of Zen Buddhism. His English-language books, many out of print or published only in Japan, were reissued by Western publishers. His influence spread throughout the West, but particularly in the United States. This American focus was not coincidental. Of course, from earlier in the century, Suzuki had strong contacts in the United States. Just as importantly, however, was the emergence of a yet another audience for his writings. Here, the relation between the United States and Japan in the decade after the war is crucial. First, the pacification agenda of the Occupation of Japan was remarkably successful. Further, the Occupation meant that a large number of American soldiers resided in Japan. Thus, personal exposure to Japan was no longer limited to the wealthy and privileged, but was open to a broader American demographic. This was accompanied by Cold War politics and the Korean conflict, which brought more American military personnel to Japan, a bonanza for Japan's struggling economy. The common result of these factors was that, from 1945 to 1955, Japan went from America's arch-enemy to becoming an American ally serving as the Asian model for successful democratic capitalism.

At that point in history, it was in the interest of both Japan and the United States to reverse the trajectory of wartime propaganda into the rhetoric of

⁶ This first edition, Suzuki 1938, was published in Japan by The Eastern Buddhist Society. In the 1959 edition, Princeton University Press published a new version for the Bollingen Foundation with the title *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki 1959.

mutual respect and appreciation. The situation called for cultural ambassadors from Japan who could communicate with Americans and represent the soft, aesthetic, spiritual side of Japan to their new friends. Suzuki fit the bill perfectly and enthusiastically. Meanwhile, some military-trained American translators like Donald Keene and Edwin Seidensticker stayed on in Japan after their service ended and became the core of a brilliant cadre of translators who created a boom of American interest in Japanese literature. Literature, the arts, and Suzuki-style Zen spirituality became the new face of Japan in the United States by the late 1950s and into the 1960s.

Simultaneously, America's dizzying economic prosperity of the late 1940s and 1950s brought suburbanization, home ownership, higher education, and economic security to a class of Americans who had only known hardship when growing up during the Great Depression. As war veterans, many had learned to be disciplined participants in a hierarchical organization. So, they were ideal workers for the new corporate world of the postwar economy. By working hard, they reaped the benefits of the newly enfranchised great middle class in America. As this cohort reached middle age in the 1960s, however, many felt that they had missed something. It seemed they had served some huge organization or other throughout their whole lives. Where was creativity and individuality? Had they sold their soul to "the system?" The "man in the grey-flannel suit," caught up in "the rat race," had become part of the "lonely crowd." By the 1960s, theologians like Alan Watts and humanistic psychoanalysts like Erich Fromm addressed this spiritual longing. When doing so, they found Suzuki, both the person and the writer, to be a useful resource.

Meanwhile, in the late 1960s, many children of the veterans—the baby boomers of the white middle class—were going off to "find themselves" in college or hippie communes. Raised in affluence, they saw the lack of free expression in their parents' lives and sought the gratification of personal soul-searching and spontaneous expression. "Consciousness-altering" became a slogan of the day. Some pursued this in the new drug culture, some in alternative spiritualities based in meditation, and some in the leftist project of raising class consciousness. With its link to artistic creativity, the freedom from dogmatic rigidity, and the emphasis on spontaneity, Suzuki's characterization of Zen fit the recipe they sought. The beat writers of the late 1950s and early 1960s had already opened the door to Zen in America, but a new generation of Americans was ready to pass through it on its own. Some even went to Japan to experience Zen first-hand.

This overall situation had a remarkable impact on American academe. Detached from their parents' experience of hard economic times, the baby boomers did not see higher education as mere preparation for the job market. Unlike their fathers' generation who had gone to college on the GI Bill to get ahead in their careers, the baby boomers thought of college as a time to develop their *personal* interests and their needs, not the needs of corporate America or the military. The crisis of conscience, as well as the suspicion about what President Eisenhower had dubbed the "military-industrial complex," escalated with the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. These factors together led to a student demand that education be revamped to serve as an agent for social change, rather than to serve as a buttress for the social-economic-political status quo. Across the country, students wanted colleges to offer courses in Asian religions, especially Buddhism. The Buddhism that most students had heard about was the Zen of the beat writers and Alan Watts. Both held D. T. Suzuki to be the font of wisdom.

The situation was now almost the reverse of what it had been when Suzuki first came to the United States to work with Paul Carus. Zen was no longer to most Americans the unknown Asian tradition, but instead the very paradigm for the "ancient wisdom of the East." Furthermore, to the college students of the 1960s and early 1970s, Zen had the double attraction of not only being a path to personal transformation, but also an adversary to the military-industrial complex and the values of materialist capitalism. To many, it did not go unnoticed that the site of Western aggression was Vietnam, a *Buddhist* country. For the students of the 1960s and early 1970s, to value Buddhism was to protest against the interests and ideology of the military-industrial complex and capitalist imperialism.

By this process, Buddhist studies—despite the miniscule number of Buddhists living in America—became a significant academic field in the United States. It was no longer an arcane specialty found only at major research universities where a single professor of Buddhist studies had an office next to the token Egyptologist and the resident scholar of Zoroastrianism. Because of student demand, Buddhist studies became an area every large religious studies program tried to include. *Every* professor in the university, regardless of specialty, had heard of Zen Buddhism and D. T. Suzuki.

Of course, most students were interested in enrolling in only a course or two in Buddhist studies. Yet, a number of bright and eager undergraduates decided they wanted to specialize in the field for graduate work. In this way,

at many universities where libraries could support it (such as Berkeley, UCLA, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Chicago, Wisconsin, and Michigan), Buddhist studies became a department or at least a free-standing degree program unto itself. Such institutions often trained the “buddhologists” who would teach those courses now required in so many religious studies programs in various colleges and universities around the country. Many Western buddhologists in training, especially those interested in East Asian Buddhism, also spent at least some time studying in Japan, the world’s epicenter of philological and historicist buddhology. Many had read every word of Suzuki’s writings and went to Japan with not only an academic interest, but also a wish to experience Zen practice first-hand.

They found that most Japanese knew little or nothing about Zen and not much more about Buddhism in general. The American exchange students wondered whether these Japanese had read Suzuki’s *Zen and Japanese Culture*. How could they be Japanese and not know or care about Zen? In the *zendō* 禅堂, these students found their Japanese colleagues were there mainly because they were the sons of Zen priests and were meeting their obligation to carry on the family business. Had these monks not read Suzuki’s *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk*? Even the Zen masters seldom matched the expectations derived from Suzuki’s accounts of the spiritually charismatic masters of history. Still, one could have concluded that Zen had merely degenerated from the heights of its golden age. Maybe Zen was simply not being authentic to its glorious history and traditions. There was much talk that Zen could perhaps be revived in the West.

Then came the final blow, a thwack louder, sharper, and more painful than could be rendered by any *kyōsaku* 警策 in the meditation hall. It came in the buddhology classroom and in the university library. It turned out that the history of Zen characterized by Suzuki was full of omissions, distortions, and outright falsehoods. Yes, Suzuki’s account followed the traditional one handed down by the Zen schools, but he already knew some of that account was historically inaccurate.⁷ That is, he continued to follow the traditional

⁷ In fact, Suzuki wrote in his preface to *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Second Series* that he would soon undertake the writing of *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Fourth Series* and that the general topic of that work would be to incorporate new information about the history of Zen as gleaned from the Dunhuang texts. “In the Fourth Series I intend to write a new history of Chinese Zen as can be gathered up from the documents thus made accessible to us.” (See Suzuki 1933, p. vii.) During the years of the Pacific War, when Suzuki wrote almost exclusively in Japanese for a Japanese readership, he did undertake some significant rewriting of early Zen history. He

narrative even where he must have known it was not true. Some young Western buddhologists in training must have felt betrayed. The man who had instilled their initial interest in Buddhism and especially Zen Buddhism had knowingly portrayed a Zen Buddhism that never really existed, neither in the past nor the present. When they returned to Suzuki's texts, they read them with new eyes. Their new perspective constituted yet another reading of Suzuki in the 1980s and 1990s.

Needing a critical theory to interpret the situation, these new readers (actually re-readers) of Suzuki found resources in the methods of their colleagues from other fields, especially literary studies. Specifically, the new buddhologists discovered various forms of post-structuralism and the post-modern critiques of the ideologies of power and authority. When used to interrogate the traditional narrative of Zen, these theoretical approaches became incisive tools for explaining why Zen had constructed its history as it had done. It revealed the regimes of rhetoric and power that made these histories hegemonic within the tradition and lent them institutional authority up to the present day. Some interpretations pushed the analysis even further to claim that the foundational notions in East Asian Buddhism like *satori* 悟り, no-mind, and Buddha nature were empty rhetorical constructs referring to nothing real. One could elicit Derrida's theories about logocentrism and deconstructionism, for example, to support a claim that there is and can be no such thing as nonconceptual experience. If that claim is valid, then not only the writings of D. T. Suzuki, but also Zen Buddhism in general, are a con game. That is, Zen terms are ciphers or empty signifiers used only to reinforce the authority of the Zen institution and the master's power over his disciples. This interpretation dovetails, in this way, with Foucault's analysis of power, discipline, and authority.

Extending this further, theories about the ideology of fascism, ultranationalism, and totalitarianism come into play in some interpretations of Suzuki. From this standpoint, Suzuki bought into the Japanese militarism and ethnocentrism of his time. We can find this in passages where he wrote about Zen's bringing us to a point "beyond good and evil." He even wrote that when the samurai's sword strikes with no-mind, it is not made impure by the blood it spills. Suzuki spoke of a "Japanese spirituality" that could serve as a model for the whole world. In this regard, Suzuki can be grouped with those members

did not, however, ever write the proposed book in English and his writings in English after the war did not reflect this revised early Zen history.

of the philosophical Kyoto School who argued for “pure experience” and the “nothingness” at the ground of “acting-intuition.”⁸ Such analyses, the interpretation goes, supported the lack of moral reflection about Japan’s actions during the war and obscured the responsibility of those who participated and supported those efforts.⁹

Such is the direction of many scholarly readings of Suzuki for the past couple of decades or so. Not surprisingly, in Buddhism courses taught in America

⁸ For an excellent analysis of the Kyoto School and its involvement in the wartime ideology of the state from different perspectives, see the essays collected in Heisig and Maraldo 1995. There are three essays in this collection that are particularly relevant to interpreting the issue of Suzuki and Japanese nationalism. Christopher Ives (pp. 16–49), in his “Ethical Pitfalls in Imperial Zen and Nishida Philosophy: Ichikawa Hakugen’s Critique,” focuses on Ichikawa’s critique of nationalism, including the way it was supported by Suzuki’s “logic of *sokuhi*.” Ives also analyzes the nationalistic assumptions inherent in Suzuki’s idea of “Japanese spirituality,” emphasizing the dualistic (and tendentious) way Suzuki elaborated on the spiritual/philosophical differences between “East” and “West.” Ives’ critique deftly shows the ethnocentrism lurking in the rhetoric and philosophical assumptions behind Suzuki’s general account of Japanese spirituality.

Kirita Kiyohide’s contribution (pp. 52–74), “D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State,” is a restricted defense of Suzuki based on his published and, importantly, unpublished writings and letters. Kirita’s point is that, however nationalistic some of Suzuki’s philosophical or cultural assumptions might seem, the evidence is overwhelming that Suzuki did not support Japan’s militaristic and imperialistic ventures. Although Suzuki’s public criticisms of the government were guarded for fear of retaliation, in his private correspondence, he was outspoken in his disgust for the militarist and imperialist takeover of Japanese politics.

John C. Maraldo’s chapter (pp. 333–62), “Questioning Nationalism Now and Then: A Critical Approach to Zen and the Kyoto School,” casts a new light and more subtle shading on the issue of Suzuki’s nationalism and his idea of Japanese spirituality. Maraldo shows that Suzuki’s discourse was, first, primarily aimed at a Japanese, not Western, audience. In the waning years of the war, Suzuki was arguing that Japan’s real contribution to the world was not military or political, but spiritual and cultural. Further, Maraldo points out that Suzuki chose to distinguish the term he preferred for “spirit,” namely, *reisei* 靈性, from the term more commonly used in state ideology: *seishin* 精神. In his way, Maraldo shows, Suzuki was arguing against the state notion of “spirit” while posing an alternative way to appreciate “Japanese spirituality.” Nevertheless, because Suzuki was arguing specifically for a *Japanese* spirituality, his analysis still maintained an ethnocentric rhetoric. This is more forgivable when the audience was Japanese and Suzuki was trying to shift the Japanese sense of national identity away from militarism. Yet, as Ives also demonstrates in his chapter, this rhetoric continued in Suzuki’s English-language writings in the last fifteen years of his life.

⁹ Such a reading of Zen, the Kyoto School, and Suzuki is not limited to Western buddhologists, incidentally. The Japanese “critical Buddhism” school of scholarship shares the same basic analysis. For a good sampling of its views in English, see Hubbard and Swanson 1997.

by buddhologically trained scholars, Suzuki's writings have disappeared from the syllabus. I myself do not have students read Suzuki in my Buddhism courses. This brings us to the more difficult question, however: where do we go from here? Since no one in the know reads Suzuki any more for insights into Buddhist history, why continue to write about how he was wrong? There certainly remains the almost endless historical project of sorting out who collaborated with the rise of Japanese militarism and how they did so. Yet, at least from the standpoint of Zen Buddhism, the basics of the story are now quite well researched and explained.¹⁰ To continue the critique further seems more like a hermeneutics of resentment than a hermeneutics of suspicion. If Suzuki was the Buddha authority for the 1960s and 1970s, we have followed Linji's advice: "if you meet a Buddha, kill him." Is there need to keep stabbing the body? We have learned immensely from critical theory's take on Zen and Suzuki. But the obituary is written; it is old news. There is now something hypocritical in accusing Suzuki for lacking the courage to stand up against the ideology of his age, while we simply follow the post-modern, post-colonial, and post-structural ideologies of our age in criticizing him.¹¹ Can we muster the courage ourselves to kill the authority of Foucault and kill the deconstructionism of Derrida?

So, the question is whether there might be yet another way to read Suzuki today, one that does not merely reinforce our own ideological and methodological assumptions about the rhetoric of power and authority. Instead of our challenging Suzuki, is there a way he can still challenge us? Can Suzuki address yet another readership and thereby have something new and important to say? I have no definitive answer to these questions, but in the remainder of this paper, I will at least try to open up the discussion. My comments will be completely personal: I am not making any attempt to claim that I have a definitive way to capture Suzuki's significance. I am not approaching Suzuki as a scholar approaching a scholar. Nor am I going to take him too literally

¹⁰ For specifics of how particular Zen masters (and D. T. Suzuki) were involved in the military effort, see the thorough analysis in Victoria 1997.

¹¹ Indeed, the hypocrisy is all the stronger when we weigh the stakes. People who today dare criticize fashionable modes of *au courant* theory may not get the academic position or awards they covet. People who criticized the Japanese state ideology in the 1930s and 1940s could well end up spending the rest of their lives in prison. This happened to both Tosaka Jun 戸坂潤 (1900–1945) and Miki Kiyoshi 三木清 (1897–1945). Tosaka and Miki were members of the Kyoto School who, despite the popular theory today that the Kyoto School philosophy inevitably leads to fascism, were noted leftists and critics of the state.

in the words he uses. Those are ink spots on the page and Suzuki could always respond with “Did *I* say that?” (To whom? When? Under what circumstances? Are those the circumstances we share right *here* and *now*?)

To engage Suzuki, I will begin with some correctives on his rhetoric. Let us, at least as a thought experiment, assume that if he could have read his critics from the past two decades, he might today say some things quite differently. He would adjust to his new audience. Of course, since Suzuki has been dead for some four decades, we will have to make the adjustments for him. First of all, we will change his phrase “Japanese spirituality” to “Suzuki spirituality.” Let us do to Suzuki what he did for Meister Eckhart in 1957 when he wrote the book, *Mysticism Christian and Buddhist: The Eastern and Western Way*. That is, he spoke of Eckhart’s mysticism as “Christian” but also as “unique.” Therefore, he felt no compulsion to determine whether Eckhart’s view was “really Christian.” Let us consider Suzuki spirituality, therefore, to be “unique” in a similar way. That is, let us take Suzuki as representing Suzuki spirituality and ignore claims (including his own as directed to his earlier audiences) about whether the spirituality he advocates is really “Zen Buddhist,” “Mahāyāna Buddhist,” “Eastern” (rather than “Western”), or “Japanese.” If we can take Suzuki spirituality in this way, do any of his claims capture our attention today? I think they can.

First, Suzuki spirituality mistrusts any form of religion that blindly follows tradition and orthodoxy without personal, experiential confirmation. He used his characterization of the history of Zen to argue that Zen refutes claims to either orthodoxy or orthopraxis for its authenticity. Because we are engaging Suzuki spirituality instead of Zen spirituality, we need not concern ourselves with the historical accuracy of this claim. We are more interested in what he was using that claim to support or exemplify: that orthodoxy and tradition can kill the life of spirituality.

Second, Suzuki maintained that his brand of spirituality is based in a non-conceptualized experience, that there is an experience more spiritually primary and foundational than what any doctrine or conceptual scheme can articulate. In this vein, we find Suzuki’s references to “no-mind,” “nothingness,” “Suchness,” and “emptiness.” Suzuki was usually clear in insisting these terms were not naming something, but were rather ciphers used to indicate unnameability. Unfortunately, he sometimes also loosely borrowed terminology of the Kyoto School and philosophized about the relation between this experience of “emptiness” and conceptualization. That is, he tried to explain philosophically how Suchness or emptiness functions either cogni-

tively or even metaphysically. Here, he was out of his element. Suzuki was no philosopher, a point obvious to many Western philosophers and a reason why they generally ignored him. By contrast, because they resonated most with the experiential side of his claims, Western theologians and humanistic psychologists found his work provocative and useful in their own projects. For our re-reading of Suzuki, we will accept his claims about nonconceptualized experience without necessarily accepting his problematic philosophical excursions.

Suzuki's claim about the possibility of nonconceptualized experience can be a stumbling block to many present-day readers. Many may assume that contemporary French theory has proven there is no "primordially given," thereby rejecting what Husserl claimed in his phenomenology. In the ideology of this critical theory, the assumption is that experience is always—down to its ground—determined within a conceptual frame. Some Western philosophers of religious mysticism also reject the possibility of nonconceptual mystical experience on other grounds, usually assuming what cannot be articulated cannot be experienced. This is not the place to develop a detailed argument in support of the reality of nonconceptual experience, but, for our purposes, we need only point out this is very much a controversial point. In any case, we should at least concede that if there is such an experience, neurologists have already discovered some likely physiological correlates. To take one example, there is the neurological phenomenon called "blindsight." This occurs when a person has suffered damage to the back portion of the brain where visual conceptualization occurs, but the visual nervous system (eye, optic nerve, visual center in the brain) is intact and fully functional. People with blindsight will insist they are "blind" and cannot see anything. Yet, using visual sensation, they can walk across an unfamiliar crowded room without bumping into anything or anyone else. At the end of the event, the people will continue to insist they cannot see and have no idea how they were able to do what they had just done. They typically say that they "just guessed" where to go.¹² In other neurological experiments that have been replicated in multiple contexts,¹³ advanced Zen meditators show unusual patterns in

¹² For the basic neuroscience of blindsight, see Weiskrantz 1986. For a study of the philosophical significance of blindsight, see Holt 2003. For a philosophical analysis of a broader range of issues related to nonconceptual experience, see the essays in Gunther 2003 and Bermúdez 2003.

¹³ For experiments done at Kyushu University and Komazawa University in Japan, see Akishige 1977. For a detailed overview and interpretation of studies performed mainly in the West, see Austin 1998.

activating and de-activating parts of the brain. Some of these locations are associated with general conceptualizing functions and others with specific functions correlated with, for example, the sense of “I” or self-identity. Therefore, for our re-reading of Suzuki, when it comes to the possibility of nonconceptualized experience, it is reasonable to go along with what the neurological empirical evidence suggests over against the unverifiable claims of deconstructionist theory.

Third, by insisting on the importance of nonconceptualized experience as foundational, Suzuki argued for the centrality of meaninglessness in spirituality. That is, although lacking meaning, nonconceptual experience is pivotal in his version of spirituality. Although Suzuki did not explicitly talk about “meaninglessness,” his terminology of “no-mind,” “emptiness,” and “no-thought” points in this direction. Without concepts, there technically can be no “meaning.” This stress on meaninglessness lies behind Suzuki’s admiration for Eckhart’s emphasis on the Godhead and on creation *ex nihilo*. It is also visible in Suzuki’s respect for Shin Buddhist spirituality (Suzuki 1970 and 1998). In his interpretation, Shin makes the binary distinction between self-power (*jiriki* 自力) and Other Power (*tariki* 他力) as a means of getting to the point of the non-bifurcated natural function of the just-so (*jinen hōni* 自然法爾). Thus, Shin spirituality uses conceptual opposition to reach a point where the meanings of the terms and their distinctions dissolve. Whether writing about Zen, Eckhart, or Shin, Suzuki appreciated a spirituality that embraced, rather than eliminated, meaninglessness.

The fourth point is a corollary to the third: Suzuki spirituality must be enacted rather than described or thought. Suzuki reiterates this idea continually with his use of Zen stories about the interactions between Zen masters and their students. (Again, for our new reading, we do not concern ourselves with the historicity and accuracy of these accounts. We only focus on Suzuki’s point in relating them.) For Suzuki spirituality, Nanyang Huizhong’s statement that “no-mind” (Ch. *wuxin* 無心) is “functioning mind” (Ch. *yongxin* 用心), for example, suggests that meaninglessness is openness to creative performance. Fixed meanings filter our experience in ways that make us responsive to our preconceived categories but closed to engaging what is right in front of us. Herein lies Suzuki’s challenge to us as new readers of his texts.

To sum up: Suzuki argues that at the core of his brand of spirituality is an acceptance of a meaninglessness that is both experienced nonconceptually and enacted creatively. In his accounts of Zen and Shin Buddhism, Suzuki

shows this meaninglessness can be reached via two routes. One route is to establish conceptual oppositions that one works through until they dissolve into meaninglessness. Zen *kōan* and the Shin dichotomy of self-power and Other Power work spiritually in this way. The other route is to cut off conceptualization at the core and to enter directly into meaninglessness via meditation or contemplation. This is the path of zazen and Eckhart.

To lend circularity to this essay and to bring us back to what is right in front of us, we can use these two routes to meaninglessness as ways of reading Suzuki's own texts on spirituality. The objective of reading a spiritual text is to open it up, to go beyond the ink spots on its page and on the pages of the commentaries about it. When a text has its meanings cast in stone, it is as dead as an epitaph on a tombstone. To be alive, a text has to be capable of always saying something new. Let us examine Suzuki's two routes for doing this.

One way to do this is to attack the standard readings, to establish polarities between what the text inscribes and what it erases. This exposes previous interpretations for what they are: the specific agenda of a particular readership who used its authority to try to control the meaning of the text. As we have seen, from the 1980s up to today, contemporary critical theory has given us a standpoint from which we can interrogate all Zen texts, including Suzuki's. Through this reading, we have found that the emperor has no clothes or at least the Zen master has no robe. As Linji prescribes, we have "seen the Buddha and killed him." What we do next, however, is crucial if we are to engage the text spiritually in Suzuki's sense.

The deconstructive reading of the Zen tradition is just that—it is an *unread*ing of the way the tradition (and Suzuki) has told us to read Zen spirituality. It is not really a new reading of the situation. If we go no further than the deconstruction, if we go no further than the disrobing of the Zen Buddhas and patriarchs, we are left picking through the cast-off rags on the floor. We never return to the Zen masters themselves. Yet, they stand before us naked and unadorned. To see the Zen masters in this way is embarrassing. Without their accoutrements of authority, they appear just as they are. They are, as Linji says, "skin bags of raw flesh." They are human beings; they are just like us. What, then, if we meet them likewise, freely casting off our own fashionable garb, dropping away the Parisian theories in which we clothe ourselves as the authorities about authority? What if we deconstruct our deconstruction of Suzuki's writings? Devoid of our *theories* of meaninglessness, we come face-to-face with meaninglessness itself. This can be a creative moment out of which a new reading emerges. So, this is the first way of reading a spiritual

text. It is oppositional, dualistic, and logical. But if pushed far enough, it ends up in a meaningless openness pregnant with creativity.

The other way of reading a spiritual text is what Suzuki thinks of as the direct encounter with meaninglessness. It is harmonizing, unitary, and affective right from the start. One dives directly into the nonconceptual until a new modality of experience and enactment opens up. From this standpoint, the text cannot be read without that primal experience. Thus, Suzuki gives *kōan* after *kōan* to prove the Zen text is unreadable. The reason to read the Zen tradition, even the reason to read Suzuki, is to remind ourselves that we do not understand and cannot understand through further reading and analysis. Therefore, we would read Suzuki to remind us we should not be reading anyone, even Suzuki. For this approach, without first experiencing meaninglessness, reading is futile. One cannot explain such an experience, but can only enact it. If one does that, the Zen tradition becomes not the library of study, but the playground of creativity.

How then should we read Suzuki today? There seem to be two approaches to Suzuki spirituality. We can push further from the deconstructive reading of Suzuki to a deconstruction of our deconstruction. Or we could simply engage in Zen practice and wait for the point of entry to open up to us, forgetting all previous interpretations and hermeneutical standpoints. For many literary texts, indeed probably for the majority of them, we do not need to dwell on such complexities. For example, we may give a book or an article a quick read, even a careful read, with no broader intent than to accumulate information. In such cases, critical reflection need not go beyond evaluating the reliability and perspective of the writer. This is probably the way to read most buddhological texts, for instance. Other books—leisure reading, for instance—may be just for immediate amusement, distraction, or edification. In such cases, we may forget the book almost as fast as we can turn its pages.

There are still other texts, though, that linger in our cultural consciousness over the years and we, in our lifetimes, find ourselves returning to them. Or we note that others from a younger generation see them anew. Such texts are classics. A classic is a work whose last chapter is always written by its readers. Those last chapters will change in some ways with each new generation, with each new audience. It may be that Suzuki's works are such classics. If so, if we dare give him another reading, we may be able to free ourselves from the attachment to the ink spots on the page. Then we might recognize the true person without status breathing in and out of the skin bag of raw flesh and exclaim, with Linji, "It's alive!"

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