

# Is Zen Buddhism?

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It may be considered strange that Zen has in any way been affiliated with the spirit of the military classes of Japan. Whatever form Buddhism takes in the various countries where it flourishes, it is a religion of compassion, and in its varied history it has never been found engaged in warlike activities. How is it, then, that Zen has come to activate the fighting spirit of the Japanese warrior?

—D. T. Suzuki<sup>1</sup>

SUZUKI'S QUESTION REMAINS the most problematic one for understanding the place of Zen within Buddhism and comparative religion generally. In his provocative study *Zen and the Way of the Sword: Arming the Samurai Psyche*,<sup>2</sup> Winston L. King raises this issue on the first page and reminds us that such perversions of moral and religious ideals are not found only in Japan. We need only consider "how the simple otherworldly ethic of Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, to love those who hate us and turn the other cheek to those who strike us could have been transformed into the Crusaders' gospel of killing infidel Saracens or into a church of bitterly feuding and even warring sects. The answers to all such questions are always complex and unsatisfactory." This response too, for valid as it is it overlooks the most important issue: the difference between our understanding of the Crusader, who would now be considered benighted by all but the most fundamentalist Christians, and the reputation of the Zen samurai spirit among contemporary Japanese and those likely to read this article. The problem, then, is not only how this perversion of Buddhism occurred, but why samurai Zen continues to be accepted and praised as a legitimate form of Buddhism.

King never addresses this question squarely, although at times he comes close. Instead, *Zen and the Way of the Sword* provides a concise and admirably clear introduction to a fascinating subject. An explanation of Zen practice and experience is followed by chapters on how the samurai adopted Zen (and

<sup>1</sup> *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959/1973), 61.

<sup>2</sup> New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

how they adapted to each other); the history of the Japanese warrior; the nature, history and forging of the Japanese sword (in loving detail and with many illustrations); the samurai code of *bushido*; the art of swordsmanship during the enforced peacetime of the Tokugawa period; and, the most provocative, a critical evaluation of D. T. Suzuki's views on Zen swordsmanship. It concludes with a rather cursory consideration of martial arts today outside as well as inside Japan, which is such a vast subject that King is able to touch on only a few examples.

The author's delight in swordmaking and swordsmanship is contagious. There are many line drawings, evidently from old prints, on armor and fighting techniques, castles and battle formations, sword forging and testing, as well as the proper way to commit *seppuku*. This information does not break any new ground (and no Japanese-language sources are cited), but it is brought together into a well-organized overview which expands the context beyond Zen and Japanese culture to bring in more general questions about the relationship between religion and society.

Nonetheless, *Zen and the Way of the Sword* is better on the sword than on Zen. The first chapter attempts to summarize the Buddhist and Taoist roots of Zen, the role of the Zen master, the function of the Zen *koan* and the meaning of Zen enlightenment into 17 pages, and is as unsatisfactory as one would expect. King provides no personal glimpses into his qualifications for explaining Zen enlightenment, and his own efforts are not encouraging: What did Koresada realize when his nose was twisted? "Probably that Reality and Truth are within" (166). His main sources are Philip Kapleau (who, despite what is said on page 21, never received *inka* from his teacher Yasutani Hakuun) and especially D. T. Suzuki. There are many quotations from Suzuki's writings, which raises problems that King does not address, if it is no longer satisfactory to accept his version of Zen uncritically. King does not shrink from making some telling criticisms of Suzuki later, but this critique is limited by the fact that King has been dependent on Suzuki for setting the terms of the discussion. The usual bifurcations are central to his explanations: intellectual, cerebral, conceptual, conscious, deliberate is bad; existential, visceral, intuitive, unconscious, instinctive is good. Given how much Suzuki criticized dualism, it is difficult to overlook how problematic these ones are. For one thing, such category-oppositions have a history and a context within Western thought that tends to be lost when they are translated into such a different language as Japanese, and vice versa: so we must be cautious about understanding the Japanese understanding of Zen in such terms. That Suzuki's English was excellent due to his years in the United States does not alleviate the problem but aggravates it: how much do his English writings skillfully adapt Zen to Western sensibilities? That is, how much did he tell us what we wanted to hear? These

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considerations have become important yet King does not raise them.

Another problem with such categories is that they conveniently valorize characteristics that just happen to be Japanese. For example: "Zen wants to act, and the most effective act, once the mind is made up, is to go on without looking backward. In this respect, Zen is indeed the religion of the samurai warrior" (Suzuki).<sup>3</sup> This exemplifies a general trait that Robert Bellah considers the most important of Japanese society: its goal-oriented behavior.<sup>4</sup> According to Nakamura Hajime, "Japanese Buddhists came to maintain the view that one should repudiate traditional disciplines *in the name of disciplines for the promotion of productive activities.*"<sup>5</sup> To make the same point from another perspective, Japanese culture is less interested in abstract theory and universalized principles than Indian. This raises again the old question how much of Zen is Buddhist and how much of Zen is Japanese. Then is Zen anti-intellectualism an aspect of Buddhist enlightenment, of the Japanese version of enlightenment, or of the Japanese understanding of enlightenment?

Raising such questions about the differences between Pali Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism brings us back to the most important issue, the relationship between Zen and the samurai spirit.

## II

The Hinayana, which tends to condemn life, has remained strict in the prohibition of killing; and it is the Mahayana, which extols life, that has ended up by finding excuses for killing and even for its glorification.

—Paul Demiéville<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not Pali Buddhism condemns life, it is strict in its prohibition

<sup>3</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949), 84.

<sup>4</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 188. For a more general discussion of the differences between East Asia and South Asia, and where the West fits into them, see David Loy, "Transcendence East and West," *Man and World* 26, no. 4: 403–427.

<sup>5</sup> Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, rev. trans., ed. by Philip P. Wiener (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964), 505. Nakamura's emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> "Le Bouddhisme et la guerre," *Melanges* (Paris: Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1957), 353.

against taking life. The eightfold path includes right action (not destroying life, etc.) and right livelihood (not making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others, such as trading in arms and weapons, soldiering, killing animals, etc.). The *Dhammapada* expresses the psychological dimension of such an attitude: "Never by hatred is hatred appeased, but it is appeased by kindness. This is an eternal truth." (44) "The victor breeds hatred, and the defeated lie down in misery. He who renounces both victory and defeat is happy and peaceful." (46)

Depending on how one understands life ("we must transcend the dualism of life and death") and killing ("no one kills, no one is killed"), it is possible to take these prohibitions in more subtle ways. The danger with this, however, is a sophistry that can end up rationalizing Buddhism itself away. In his admirable study "The Modern State and Warfare: Is there a Buddhist Position?" Brian (Daizen) Victoria finds "no evidence in what are generally considered to be the fundamental tenets of Buddhism (centered on the Four Noble Truths and Holy Eightfold Path) that would condone an adherent's participation in the killing of other human beings for any reason whatsoever. Thus, Buddhism, at least in its earliest formulation, must be considered to take the position of absolute pacifism as its normative standard of conduct."<sup>7</sup> The life of Sakyamuni Buddha, as conveyed in the Nikayas for example, is completely consistent with such teachings. It is inconceivable that he could have lived as a samurai, or that he would have approved of any such use of his teachings.

What Victoria says about the early Buddhist sangha enables us to develop this contrast further:

The Sangha was organized to be a non-coercive, non-authoritarian, democratic society where leadership came only from good moral character and spiritual insight. It is an order of society which has no political ambitions within the nation, and in whose ranks there is no striving for leadership. It seeks to persuade men and women to follow its way, by example and exhortation, not by force. By completely eliminating the then prevalent caste system from its ranks, Buddha Sakyamuni may rightly be considered one of history's first leaders not only to advocate but actually to practice his belief in the basic

<sup>7</sup> In the *1990 Anthology of Fo Kuang Shan International Buddhist Conference*, 378. "My reading of Buddhist political history tells me that every time Buddhist leaders have closely aligned themselves with the political ruler of their day, the Buddha Sangha has become corrupt and degenerate. . . . The Sangha's often slavish subservience to, and actions on behalf of, their rulers have resulted, in my opinion, in its becoming the de facto pimp and prostitute of the State." (379)

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equality of all human beings. He clearly hoped that the religious and social ideals of the Sangha would one day permeate the whole of society. (369)

How well have these ideals permeated Japanese Buddhism? Historically, Japan has been very good at adapting to foreign influences, and Buddhism is famously adaptable. This adaptability has been a two-edged sword, enabling Buddhism to permeate other cultures by adapting their religious institutions to its own ends, but also allowing Buddhism to be co-opted (even, in its birthplace, to be assimilated by the “fraternal embrace” of Hinduism, as Coomaraswamy put it). The Mahayana doctrine that samsara is not other than nirvana may be understood in opposite ways: the true *sunya* nature of samsara may be taken as nirvana itself, or nirvana redefined in more this-worldly ways which end up rationalizing cravings, nationalism and subservience to secular authority.

From this perspective, the basic problem with Japanese Buddhism appeared at the very beginning: Buddhism was first brought into Japan by the ruling classes, who saw it as a potent means to preserve the nation—which for them meant their own position, of course. Zen arrived several centuries later, yet it continued a pattern that by then had been set. King cites the case of Eisai (1141–1215), the “founder” of Zen, as typical. After returning from his second trip to China, during which he was ordained as a Rinzai master, Eisai found that his “new” Buddhism was not acceptable to the Tendai hierarchy at Enryakuji. So he went to Kamakura, where he gained the favor of the widow of the first shogun Minamoto Yoritomo, and she established a new temple for him. His first major writing was *Treatise on the Spread of Zen for the Protection of the Nation*. (Dōgen too wrote a work, now lost, entitled *The Method of Protecting the Country by the True Dharma*.) Only later was he invited back to Kyoto as an honored monk-teacher. If the traditional stories can be trusted, establishing oneself by currying the favor of the powerful was not the way of Sakyamuni, nor the way of the early Chinese patriarchs, who only reluctantly answered the requests of emperors to become national teachers.<sup>8</sup> The contact with secular authority is not in itself objectionable; according to the Nikayas Sakyamuni had numerous dealings with rulers, but as teacher and adviser, evidently because his Dharma was respected for itself, as an alternative authoritative Law. The problem arises when Buddhist teachings and pres-

<sup>8</sup> This was not as true later. “While Buddhist monks in the southern part of China (under the Chin dynasty) successfully maintained their independence of the State, their northern counterparts did not fare as well. Faced with non-Chinese rulers, Buddhists monks offered their services as political, diplomatic and military advisers” (King, 371).

tige are appropriated for other ends, as an ideology that supports the state and justifies privilege and class.

If, as Victoria points out, Sakyamuni believed in the equality of all human beings and hoped sangha ideals would come to permeate all of society, the issue of social hierarchy is especially problematical for Japanese Zen, which came to emphasize devotion to one's lord more than one's personal path of liberation from desire and delusion. Or, more precisely, the two tended to be equated: to let-go of oneself was understood to mean identifying completely with one's daimyo. "I have no desire to attain buddhahood," Yamamoto Tsunetomo, author of the *Hagakure*, wrote *after* he had retired to become a monk. "The sincere resolution deeply engraved on my mind is to be reborn for as many as seven times as a Nabeshima samurai and administer our clan." However praiseworthy this may be as an example of egolessness, it still needs to be asked in what sense Yamamoto is a Buddhist monk.

King identifies an inbuilt factor in Buddhism which tended to work against its own teaching that life is sacred: a doctrine of karmic destiny. "And free as Zen may have been in some respects from the bonds of the Buddhist tradition, it was not free from the bonds of the teaching of karma" (33). Karma is a complicated issue in Buddhism and it is too simple to say that Zen encourages us to accept such karma, yet something like that seems to be implied by the repeated exhortation to become one with our immediate circumstances. King also cites the strong sense of family loyalty and tradition, especially among the Japanese upper classes. As an endorsement of one's family and occupation, however, these attitudes become questionable in the light of Sakyamuni's own example—not only when they lead to violating the precept against killing, but because the sangha was originally established as an alternative to such family and caste obligations, which Sakyamuni himself had obviated by abandoning his own family and royal position.

The difficulty with accepting one's "karmic destiny" is that a collective "we-go," such as the Japanese understanding of egolessness encouraged, is not intrinsically superior to the individual ego. It may be even more dangerous, depending on how those energies are channelled. It is relevant, therefore, that the absolute loyalty expected by family-heads and daimyo did not extend to interdaimyo relations, for the daimyo did not consider their own compacts to be binding. As King points out, such agreements tended to be marriages of convenience, "a cagey betting on the winner of the next set of battles, cemented by intermarriages and hostages. Hence Japanese military history is full of temporary alliances, broken or shifted when conditions changed" (132).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Eisai's relationship with the secular powers—that-be developed into a Faustian compact fatal to the original non-violent spirit of Buddhism. That Zen taught the samurai how to be loyal to

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their daimyo and how to fight better for their daimyo elevated that social relationship above the fundamental Buddhist precept not to kill any living beings, especially humans. If it is important to recognize the problems with Western subject-object dualism, what about the dualism that pits me and my daimyo against you and yours? When we consider all the killing that has occurred on behalf of abstractions like God and the future socialist utopia, egoless devotion to a particular person can seem attractive; but only until we ask whether what inspired that daimyo was anything more than his (and his clan's) own lust for power, wealth and prestige. Accepting one's karmic role in such a social system does provide a clear solution to the perennial problem about the meaning of one's life, yet we should be clear that this was not Sakyamuni's solution.

*The Code of the Samurai* exhorts that "one who is a samurai must before all things keep constantly in mind, by day and by night, . . . the fact that he has to die. That is his chief business" (126). No one would deny that Zen should help us to be able to die; but one may still be uncomfortable with the other idea implicit here, that this will enable us to kill better. The issue is, finally, an ethical one: did *bushido* provide an ethic, or did it serve in place of an ethic? That is, did it provide some moral authority tempering the power of secular authority? King quotes Roger Ames: "*bushido* being centered in this resolution to die, it is not in any strict sense an ethical system at all . . . In essence, it does not represent any particular mode of conduct or normative standards" (125). This may remind us of the bodhisattva, whose compassionate activities are not limited by the bounds of conventional morality, yet it is very different, because insofar as Zen did not provide an alternative moral perspective on the hierarchical and predatory social system, it became co-opted by it. As Ames continues: "Of course, historically, the proponent of *bushido*, the samurai, did align himself with a prevailing morality, or more likely was born into circumstances where the decision of moral alignment was predetermined."

I think King puts his finger on the problem:

If, as Suzuki claims, Zen is impatient with all rationalizing and ethicizing and believes only in visceral-intuitive rightness, if it can be (as already noted) "wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism or any political or economic dogmatism," serving any master that happens to be dominant at the time or place where Zen is, can it be called "Buddhist" in any meaningful sense; or is it only a subjective energy-providing technique?

. . . For essentially Zen, with its slight regard for scripture and

literary or ritual tradition, has no means of checking its "Buddhist" quality from time to time or maintaining a consistent witness to a good or holy life-pattern. (190-191)

Perhaps this gives us some insight into the recent scandals in many U.S. Zen centers, whose teachers (mostly Japanese or Japanese-trained) were discovered to have engaged in sexual, financial and other misconduct. If King is right, the basic difficulty is that Zen training does not in itself prepare such teachers to deal with the kinds of moral dilemmas and temptations that their positions expose them to, especially in a more individualistic, non-Confucian society.

Suzuki could not help touching on the problem of morality in his *Zen and Japanese Culture* chapters on swordsmanship. King quotes most of a long paragraph that encapsulates Suzuki's view:

The sword is generally associated with killing, and most of us wonder how it can come into connection with Zen, which is a school of Buddhism that teaches the gospel of love and mercy. The fact is that the art of swordsmanship distinguishes between the sword that kills and the sword that gives life. The one that is used by a technician cannot go any further than killing, for he never appeals to the sword unless he intends to kill. The case is altogether different with the one who is compelled to lift the sword. For it is really not he but the sword itself that does the killing. He has no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim. It is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice, which is the function of mercy. This is the kind of sword that Christ is said to have brought among us. It is not meant just for bringing the peace mawkishly cherished by sentimentalists . . . [This sword] is no more a weapon of self-defense or an instrument of killing, and the swordsman turns into an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality. (Suzuki, 145)

This is not one of Suzuki's better paragraphs. According to it, selflessness makes the killing sword into a life-giving instrument of righteousness, for the man who has mastered the art does not *use* the sword; thus the opponent may be said to kill himself. "[T]he enemy is filled with the evil spirit of killing and so he is killed by this evil spirit" (Suzuki, 180). In the Japanese feudal era, though, were all enemies really evil? And what would happen, then, if feuding daimyo required two enlightened swordmasters to fight? Would each be killed by the selfless sword of the other?

King too finds such apologetics unconvincing. He is left "almost speech-



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less” by the logic that produces this Zen work of genuine originality, as if a blow that kills were ethically indistinguishable from the brushstroke of a calligraphy master. “There is a vague and imprecise hope that the Zen-inspired sword is, indeed, functioning as an instrument of ‘justice’—one presumes in the conceptual, moralistic sense of the word. But it is apparently not absolutely necessary that it be so to make such deeds beyond and above ordinary ethical judgments” (186).

In sum, insofar as the Zen experience “transcends” concepts and ethics, and emphasizes oneness with one’s situation, its Japanese practitioners seem more vulnerable to the prevailing ideology and more likely to be co-opted by the dominant social system. Instead of providing a moral and spiritual perspective on secular authority, Zen ends up sacralizing secular authority.

### III

Despite some passages (such as the above paragraph on Zen swordsmanship) that lend themselves to such cooptation, Suzuki himself did not fall into this trap. His twelve years in the U.S. and Europe (1897–1909) provided him with an international perspective on the emperor system, state Shinto, militarism, and the self-righteous “Japanese spirit” they propagated.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for most of his colleagues in the Zen world, who did not benefit from such a lengthy internationalization. For example, Suzuki’s teacher Shaku Sōen, a progressive, university-educated roshi who portrayed Buddhism as a “universal religion” at the Chicago World’s

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed study of Suzuki’s social and political views, see Kiyohide Kirita, “D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State,” in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*, edited by James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 52–74. For an example of Suzuki’s anti-war views, see “Why Do We Fight?” *The Eastern Buddhist* OS vol. 1, no. 4 (November–December 1921), 270–281. A note on Shinran in *The Eastern Buddhist* OS vol. 1, no. 5 contrasts him favorably with Nichiren, who “inspired the militarists of some years ago when a jingoistic spirit reigned in this country” (395–396). “Buddhism and Education” (*The Eastern Buddhist* OS vol. 8, no. 1 [May 1949], 36–45) contrasts Shinto and Buddhism: “Shinto is warlike, militant, and devoid of a loving spirit; while Buddhism is just the opposite, for it teaches all-embracing love which knows no enemy of whatever nature” (36). “My firm conviction is that if Buddhism held the Japanese statesmen, militarists, and people generally in its firmer grasp, that is, if Japan had been governed by Buddhism and not by Shinto as she has been until recently, there would have been no such war as the one whose most ignominious catastrophe we Japanese are all experiencing just at present” (37).

Parliament of Religions, actively supported the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and justified it in terms embarrassing to read today:

War is not necessarily horrible, provided that it is fought for a just and honorable cause, that it is fought for the upholding of humanity and civilization. Many material human bodies may be destroyed, many humane hearts be broken, but from a broader point of view these sacrifices are so many phoenixes consumed in the sacred fire of spirituality, which will arise from the smoldering ashes reanimated, ennobled, and glorified.<sup>10</sup>

Thus have all wars been justified by their apologists. When Tolstoy wrote asking him to cooperate in appealing for peace, Sōen refused and visited the war front to encourage the troops, declaring that

war against evils must be unflinchingly prosecuted till we attain the final aim. In the present hostilities, into which Japan has entered with great reluctance, she pursues no egoistic purpose, but seeks the subjugation of evils hostile to civilization, peace, and enlightenment. . . . I came here with a double purpose. I wished to have my faith tested by going through the greatest horrors of life, but I also wished to inspire, if I could, our valiant soldiers with the ennobling thoughts of the Buddha, so as to enable them to die on the battlefield with the confidence that the task in which they are engaged is great and noble. I wished to convince them of the truths that this war is not a mere slaughter of their fellow-beings, but that they are combating an evil, and that, at the same time, corporeal annihilation really means a rebirth of soul, not in heaven, indeed, but here among ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

Harada Sōgaku (1870–1961), the abbot of Hosshin-ji, made the identification between Zen and war complete and explicit:

Forgetting [the difference between] self and others in every situation, you should always become completely one with your work. [When ordered to] march—tramp, tramp; [when ordered to] fire—bang, bang; this is the clearest expression of the highest Bodhi-wisdom, the

<sup>10</sup> Shaku Soyen, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot: Addresses on Religious Subjects*, trans. D. T. Suzuki (New York: Weiser, 1971), 211–12. The full text was originally published in 1906 and taken from a memorial address for those who died in the war.

<sup>11</sup> Shaku Soyen, *Zen for Americans* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Press, reprinted 1974), 201–3.

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unity of Zen and war.<sup>12</sup>

What is most discomfoting about these words is not that Sōen and Harada support war, but that they invoke Buddhism to justify and promote it. In Sōen's case, a terminology appropriate to Armageddon is used to excuse a war of colonial expansion. In Harada's case, the nonduality of self and other—an essential principle of Suzuki's timeless, ahistorical Zen—is used in a way that flatly contradicts the basic spirit of Sakyamuni's teachings. The issue is complicated by the European colonization of Asia, which made the Japanese fearful for their own independence; the Russo-Japanese War, for example, was started in reaction to Russia's imperialist moves into Manchuria and the Liaodong peninsula. What is not complicated, however, is the unquestioned identification of Zen ideology with nationalistic aims. If both Sōen and Harada were politically and historically benighted, or at least uncritical, one wonders how much Zen anti-intellectualism played a part in this. Again, the problem is not so much that they were products of their time, but how much Zen contributed to making and keeping them so.

A recent paper by Robert Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,"<sup>13</sup> argues for a close relationship between such Zen ideology and *nihonjinron*, the popular pseudo-science devoted to demonstrating the uniqueness (and usually the superiority) of Japanese culture and spirit. Sharf believes this is true not only for the Zen religious establishment but for the philosophical proselytizers whose views have been most influential in the West. He devotes a long section to *nihonjinron* themes in D. T. Suzuki's writings which he traces back to 1935, when Suzuki began publishing a series of Zen books in Japanese that are still largely unknown outside Japan. This section is not persuasive, however, in the light of Kirita's much more detailed study of Suzuki's social and political views. For example, during the Pacific War Suzuki's non-Buddhist writings were concerned to find a uniquely Japanese spirituality in Buddhism, especially in its Pure Land sects; yet this did not lead him to exalt the Japanese people or offer them as an example for the rest of the world to follow. The following passage is typical:

The Japanese are highly sentimental and lacking in logic, have difficulty in forming an independent judgment on the right and

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Daizen Victoria, "Japanese Corporate Zen," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 12, no. 1 (1980), 65.

<sup>13</sup> *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (August 1993), 1-43.

*Editor's note:* Since republished in revised form in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 107-160.

wrong of things, are only concerned about being ridiculed by others, and are reluctant to enter into unknown and unexplored areas, and if they should dare to do so, they do it recklessly and without any plans made in advance.<sup>14</sup>

This is not *nihonjinron*. However, some of Sharf's other targets are more difficult to defend. Suzuki's lifelong friend the philosopher Nishida Kitarō "was himself guilty of the most spurious forms of *nihonjinron* speculation," such as repeatedly characterizing Japanese culture as one of "pure feeling," more emotional, aesthetic and communal than (and, by implication, superior to) the intellectual, rationalistic and scientific cultures of the West (23). In 1944, a difficult year for all Japanese, Nishida declared that contemporary Buddhists "have forgotten [the] true meaning of the Mahayana. Eastern culture must arise again from such a standpoint. It must contribute a new light to world culture. As a self-determination of the absolute present, the national polity (*kokutai*) of Japan is a norm of historical action in such a perspective. The above mentioned true spirit of the Mahayana is in the East preserved today only in Japan."<sup>15</sup> This must be taken in the light of Nishida's apparent support for the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere and for the Pacific War.<sup>16</sup>

Such a *nihonjinron* attitude was evidently shared by Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889–1980), who also believed that only Japanese have the aesthetic and intellectual sensibility necessary to fathom Zen, despite the fact that this truth was universal:

I have long spoken of "Oriental Nothingness". . . I qualify it as Oriental because in the West such Nothingness has never been fully awakened, nor has there been penetration to such a level. However, this does not mean that it belongs exclusively to the East. On the contrary, it is the most profound basis or root source of man; in this sense it belongs neither to the East or West. Only as regards the actual Awakening to such a Self, there have been no instances in the

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in "D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State," 60. For its source, Kirita gives the *Collected Works* (in Japanese), vol. 21, page 179.

<sup>15</sup> "Towards a Philosophy of Religion with the Concept of Pre-established Harmony as a Guide," trans. David A. Dilworth, *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS, vol. 3, no. 1 (1970), 36. See Sharf, 24.

<sup>16</sup> How much Nishida supported them, and why, are difficult issues discussed at length in *Rude Awakenings*. See especially the chapters by Ives, Ueda, Yusa, and Jacinto Zavala.

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West; hence the regional qualification "Oriental."<sup>17</sup>

Sharf recounts a well-known conversation between Hisamatsu and Suzuki recorded at Harvard University in 1958:

Hisamatsu: Among the many people you've met or heard of (in the West) is there anyone who you think has some understanding of Zen?

Suzuki: No one. Not yet anyway.

Hisamatsu: I see. Not yet. Well then, is there at least someone you have hope for? (Laughter)

Suzuki: No. Not even that.

Hisamatsu: So, of the many people (in the West) who have written about Zen there aren't any who understand it?

Suzuki: That's right.

Hisamatsu: Well, is there at least some book written (by a Westerner) which is at least fairly accurate?

Suzuki: No. Not to my knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Taken out of context, this conversation is somewhat misleading: Suzuki had high hopes for Zen in the West, while recognizing that its naturalization abroad would take time. Nonetheless, if Zen experience is indeed the essence of all religion, as Suzuki so often claimed, this conclusion cannot help but be depressing. Yet there is more than one way to understand their dialogue. It may be that Occidental culture is so rationalistic and so infected by subject-object dualism that all Westerners are spiritually obtuse. But it is also possible that the problem is on the other side as well: that a supposedly universal experience has in fact come to be defined primarily in Japanese terms.

Sharf concludes by situating the *nihonjinron* impulse in its historical context, as one intellectual reaction to the radical and destabilizing transformation of Japan initiated by the Meiji reformation:

*Nihonjinron* is in large part a Japanese response to modernity—the sense of being adrift in a sea of tumultuous change, cut off from the past, alienated from history and tradition. Since the Meiji reforms, Japanese intellectuals have been confronted with the collapse of traditional Japanese political and social structures, accompanied by the insidious threat posed by the the hegemonic discourse of the

<sup>17</sup> *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Gishin Tokiwa (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1971; originally published in 1957 as *Zen to bijutsu*), 48. See Sharf, 31–2.

<sup>18</sup> *FAS Society Journal* (Spring 1986), 19–23.

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West. In response, the Japanese would formulate a conception of Japaneseness that would, in part, insulate themselves from Western universalizing discourse. This was accomplished through insisting that the essence of Japanese character lay in a uniquely Japanese *experience* of the world, an experience that was thus conveniently out of the reach of foreigners. (36–37)

Whether or not this overstates the case, it touches on something important. The Meiji restoration remains an ambiguous legacy. Traumatized by its brutal forced opening to the rest of the world, acutely aware of the need to adopt Western technology as quickly as possible in order to defend itself from the imminent colonization that devastated the rest of Asia, not only Japan's self-confidence but its very self-identity were badly shaken. It is not surprising, then, that Zen and the samurai spirit became understood to exemplify the superior soul of the Japanese—which happened to fit nicely into a concern that arose in certain quarters of the West to find a superior “other” with which to flog itself. We may sympathize with Japan's need to establish its own identity on the world stage, and Japanese intellectuals' need to avoid the “hegemonic discourse” of the West. Nonetheless, the resulting self-understanding of Japanese Zen Buddhists cannot be accepted uncritically.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer and Dan Yukie for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.