

Conversations with D. T. Suzuki

PART I

D. T. SUZUKI AND WINSTON L. KING

Foreword

At the time of these conversations I was certain that they represented an opportunity I could not afford to miss; and since then I have looked back upon them as a very great privilege—particularly in view of Dr. Suzuki's death soon thereafter.

In one sense they will not add anything startlingly new or substantial to Dr. Suzuki's voluminous writings. In fact we began at least one discussion on the basis of my reference to something he had written, and referred to other of his statements along the way. And he said on several occasions such things as "I often say" or "I have said."

In other words there are here no recently discovered "later" Suzuki materials, or indeed any major scholarly expositions, but informal conversations largely following the lead of the questions put by me. Some of those questions were naive; today I would rephrase them. And now and again there seems to be a non sequitur, due either to the fact that he did not fully hear what I said (because of his partial deafness) or because he wished to carry on his train of thought a little further.

Their value, if any, lies in their very informality, of Zen in the context of a conversation rather than in the formal structuring of a book or article. Here is the "informal Suzuki," whose themes are not new, but who can "chat" about them as well as write about them. Of course the "formal" and "informal" Suzukis are much alike, and his Zen is fully present in each—proving to me the genuineness of the article. Obviously it did not depend upon the "authority" of the printed form!

The language has been very little altered. My own statements have been

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somewhat shortened. And in both cases conversational hemmings and hawings that obscured meaning or were redundant have been eliminated. But for the rest the words herein are as Dr. Suzuki spoke them. The only deletion of consequence is that of the *sound* of Dr. Suzuki's voice which even now vividly brings back to me the flavor of those hours and the charming Zen-Japanese combination of qualities that were Dr. Suzuki himself.

WINSTON L. KING

Dialogue 1

The first of these dialogues with Dr. Suzuki took place in his summer home up in the resort area of Karuizawa, a five hour or so train ride from Tokyo. My wife Jocelyn and I were attending an East-West seminar on Buddhism, as its Western components, at the kind invitation of Takeuchi Yoshinori of Kyoto University, where he was also my sponsor that year as a Fulbright lecturer. So too it was he who arranged, almost unbeknownst to me, for this first of our conversations. (I had not known that Dr. Suzuki, several of whose books I had of course read, and whom I had met briefly at a conference in 1957 at LaSalle, Illinois, was summering there.) Asked by Professor Takeuchi if I would *like* to talk with Dr. Suzuki, I immediately answered: "Yes, of course."

So it was the late afternoon of August 24, 1965 when we (Professor Takeuchi and the two of us) presented ourselves at his home. We were warmly welcomed by Miss Okamura Mihoko, who had served him so very well in a "granddaughterly" kind of way as nurse, companion and secretary for some ten years or more.

Shortly Dr. Suzuki came in—the same wispy frail-seeming man with the butterfly-wing eyebrows projecting over his plain metal rimmed eyeglasses, as I remembered from LaSalle. Of course he had to be older, some eight years, but as with a sere Japanese pine it was hard to tell the difference made by so short a time. And the bright glance, the fully-alive presence, and ready (self-deprecating) chuckle seemed ageless—unaffected by his almost ninety-five years.

We were again warmly and informally welcomed. And with everyone settled in place, the recorder, earphone, and microphone properly adjusted, the dialogue began—

Suzuki: Japanese Buddhism is divided into so many different sects but fundamentally they come from the same root. In my opinion Bud-

dhism, North and South, East and West, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, all come from the same foundation, that is, Buddha's hymn of victory—as I remember, the Dhammapada verses 153–154.¹ Now that hymn of victory is a very interesting verse.

King: How would you classify the “same root” in all these Buddhisms? For example, how would you briefly characterize the essential sameness of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism?²

Suzuki: Hīnayāna emphasizes the negative side of it. They talk so much about *anatta*,³ or impermanence, or Nirvana, in the sense of *extinction*. But Japanese Buddhism emphasizes the positive side, that is to say, the more affirmative side. And according to my own idea—other people may have different opinions—but according to my own idea, Mahāyāna Buddhism as it is practiced in Japan, emphasizes the affirmative side. That is to say, the negative side is at the same time the affirmative side, which means that negation is affirmation. It is a contradiction, flatly. But still that very contradiction is in fact the truth.

King: I was very interested to read a year or two ago, in one of your books (I think it's in the little paperback book of essays called *Zen Buddhism*) a statement of yours which bears on what you have just been saying. As I understood you, you were speaking about the different attitudes which Mahāyāna Buddhism has toward what Southern Buddhism calls “*tanha*,” thirst for life. In Southern Buddhism it is con-

¹ (Radhakrishnan tr.):

I have run through a course of many births looking for the maker of this dwelling and finding him not; painful is birth again and again. (153)

Now you are seen, O builder of the house, you will not build the house again. All your rafters are broken, your ridge-pole is destroyed, the mind, set on the attainment of *nirvana*, has attained the extinction of desires. (154)

Radhakrishnan notes: “The builder of the house is craving, *tanha*. It is the cause of rebirth. If we shake off craving there is nothing to bind us to the wheel of existence.”

² Hīnayāna (Small-inferior Means — of salvation) was named by the Mahāyāna (Great Means) school of Buddhism about the beginning of the Christian era. Mahāyāna is the name applied to the Northern Buddhism of China, Korea, and Japan. Southern Buddhists of Southeast Asia prefer the term Theravāda (Teaching of the Elders) as the designation for this type of Buddhism.

³ *Anatta* means no-self. Nirvana is a “going-out” into a state beyond time and space, birth and death, achieved by the Buddha and his enlightened saints. So Theravāda-Mahāyāna says: Samsara (this birth-death existence) is Nirvana.

sidered as being absolutely evil, needing to be cut off, to be stamped out. As I now somewhat vaguely recall it you made this passing comment: what is called *tanha* in Southern (Theravāda) Buddhism has been brought back in Northern (Mahāyāna) Buddhism into the mainstream of spiritual activity or reality, and here it is recognized as not completely evil but to have its good side. In the sense of "suchness" (*tathatā*)⁴ it projects itself creatively into existent or phenomenal forms, whereby the life condemned (in Theravāda) for its *tanha* associations is here considered to be *good*. Is that approximately correct?

Suzuki: Yes. I am much more expressive about this now. In former days I was not clear about what I am talking about now, but recently or rather in the last few years, I have come to the conclusion that what is negated by the Theravāda school is *itself* affirmation. In Theravāda they say that after negation comes affirmation. This is not the right idea. Their negation itself is affirmation. That is the most important part. If we say, "after negation comes affirmation," that affirmation has also to be negated. According to the hymn of victory (they talk much about the extinction of *tanha*, the dissolution of the *skandhas*)⁵ this dissolution of the *skandhas* is negatively understood. But in Mahāyāna that is itself affirmation. Yes, they are *identical*.

King: Well, then it is not a temporal difference. It is *not* one first and *then* the second, as you have said. Is it then a difference in the quality, or level, or context, of what is "affirmed" and what is "negated"?

Suzuki: All those phrases or expressions do not apply to this case, because this is a kind of *leap*. As long as we stay on the level of the intellect or logic or dialectic we cannot really understand. Therefore none of those terms applies to this understanding, we may say.

King: Would you consider as something perhaps analogous at least, a statement that is attributed to Jesus: "He that saveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life shall save it"? Would you call this *your* sort of negation-affirmation?

Suzuki: Yes. But as long as we are on the level of ordinary intellec-

⁴ *Tathatā* or suchness or thatness is things just as they are, prior to valuations such as good-bad and real-unreal.

⁵ *Skandhas* are the groups of components of which, according to Theravāda Buddhism, man is composed, namely, of body, feeling, perception, mental factors, and consciousness.

tion we say that when Christ is crucified and then resurrected, there is a space of three days between. But we can see that the very instant he is crucified he was also born in heaven. Of course this is more or less symbolical because in Christianity, they have not denied the existence of an ego. "Ego" is held by all Western philosophers, dualistically. Therefore that "ego" has to be crucified. But Buddhism from the very beginning denied the existence of an ego. Therefore there is no need of crucifying that ego if you simply recognize that ego's non-existence. Well, that very "non-existence" makes the ego actually exist. That is to say, the ego on a higher level.

King: Now, my difficulty is the statement that on the one hand the "self" is utterly denied, that one progressively realizes there is no self. And yet, on the other hand, I see here someone (the *arahat*)⁶ who becomes ever more *self*-possessed, *self*-controlled, able to direct his life from within the self and not be coerced by outward circumstances. So I have phrased it in a way that I am sure is not satisfactory to Buddhists: Nirvana is the perfection of *atta* (self) as well as the perfection of *anatta* (no-self). Which means that the two ways (of self and no-self) are essentially one.

Suzuki: I don't think it quite agrees with my view when you say "perfection." We talk about "perfection," but it's not perfection, it is "just so." Mahāyāna uses the word "suchness"—isness we might say. When Eckhart in his encounter with the beggar says "Good morning," the beggar says, "*Every* morning is a good morning. Why this particular morning?" Then the discussion comes around after a little conversation to this: "When does God come into one's heart?" "When the heart is thoroughly pure," Eckhart answers, "thoroughly pure."

But that purity does not mean there is no *impurity*. "Pure" means emptiness. That is the word's actual use. If there is anything left in your heart God can't get in. It must be thoroughly empty, thoroughly cleared of all "dirt," so-called. That means that *then* God comes in. If it's empty, if God finds it empty—no, it's not that: Emptiness itself is God's presence!

I don't know much about Christian theology, but Cusano (Nicholas of Cusa) spoke quite frequently of the coincidence of contradictions.

⁶ *Arahat*: one who has achieved enlightenment and will enter Nirvana upon death, according to Theravāda Buddhism.

Nishida says: *Zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*. That is: "Absolute contradiction is self-identity." This is quite beyond the level of ordinary logic. It is difficult, impossible to understand. Contradiction itself cannot be united, cannot be "identified" with itself.

I often say it this way. Western people think, they build their philosophy on logical thinking. And "thinking" is based on dividing subject and object. There must be one who thinks that which is thought. But in the East, especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism, no division takes place. That is, *before* that division takes place, when we begin to talk about "before" and "after," "priority" and "posteriority," and so on, when the intellect creates an "idea." But when we are talking we can't ever be where we were when we were thinking for talking itself is temporal (that is, takes time). We can't help it. Therefore in the Shin sect⁷ "Namu Amida Butsu" is not the oral recitation of the phrase. Namu Amida Butsu itself is it.

There is a little Japanese poem:

When one recites Namu Amida Butsu
There is neither Buddha
Nor one who recites Namu Amida Butsu.

It does not say "Namu Amida Butsu" remains, or that the Buddha goes away and the one who recites goes away and "Namu Amida Butsu" is left; but simply "Namu Amida Butsu." It does not say anything more. So, philosophers come together to discuss the Nembutsu: "What does it really mean?" they ask. It does not *mean* anything, simply "Namu Amida Butsu." That is the most important part. Therefore religion is really true when it comes to that understanding of life experience.

King: As I recall it you wrote in a book that at the time or at the point when the repetition of the Nembutsu becomes almost automatic, at *that* moment Pure Land Buddhism comes closest to being something like Zen. Here the two approach nearest to each other.

This seems to me to be almost a contradiction. The repetition of the

⁷ Shin(shū) Buddhism is a Pure Land Buddhist sect in Japan. Its believers trust in the Amida Buddha and his vows to save all men of faith, in his Pure Land or Western Paradise. The Nembutsu is the repetition of "Namu Amida Butsu"—Hail to Amida Buddha—shortened in practice to "Namu Amida Butsu."

Nembutsu until it goes below the level of conscious thought and becomes, we would say in the West, semi-mechanical—how could *this* bring Pure Land Buddhism to its nearest point of identity with or likeness to Zen Buddhism, which on the whole turns radically away from mere ritual-like repetition? If you could say something about this. . . .

Suzuki: It is a most unfortunate fact that the repetition of “Namu Amida Butsu” really has nothing to do with the understanding of Buddhism nor of Zen. This repetition is more or less the psychological phase of the “Namu Amida Butsu” we might say. But in repetition like that of the Mohammedan dervish’s dance, in repeating something one time after another, the mind gets into a certain state of uniformity. This uniformity itself we might say is an identification of thinker and thought.

King: Reconciliation of opposites?

Suzuki: Yes. But at the same time there must be a certain self-awakening. For instance, we have cats around here. When the cat moves it just moves. It does not think “I am going to move. I am moving.” When it falls from a height, it just falls and goes “meow.” It does not think “I have fallen from the height. What made me fall from there? Is anybody hurt? Am I hurt?” It doesn’t care at all, it just goes off.

But at the same time when *he* does something, the human being reflects within himself and knows “I am doing it.” Yet at the same time he (the actor) is not *divided* from this thinker “I.” Actor “I” and thinker “I” are identified. So then it is the same with the Namu Amida Butsu—“just this”—though Shin people generally may not agree with me in this.

Then we say “awakening,” when one’s own self has awakened to the fact, he will know that the repetition is no more than this awakening itself.

This is what Hui-neng (Enō), the Sixth Patriarch in Zen, talks about in the Platform Sutra (*Rokusodangyō*) when he says: “*Dhyāna* is *prajñā*, and *prajñā* is *dhyāna*.”¹ They are the same. That is to say, the

¹ *Dhyāna* means meditation. *Prajñā* means the wisdom of enlightenment. Hence the means (*dhyāna*) is identical with the end result (*prajñā*).

thinker is the actor. But when we try to speak about it, this division takes place and then we are on the level of intellection.

This is the sad fate, the tragic fate of human beings. At the same time *because* of this tragedy we are human. And we are glad that we are!

King: That's the next question I'd like to ask, about this matter of the intellect and its "falsity," the fact that it brings man into bondage and so forth. You just said that we are "glad that we are human beings." It seems to a Westerner that when there is talk about "getting away" from or "destroying" intellection, that man thereby renounces that which makes him man, his true nature. And is he then on a higher than human, or lower than human level?

Suzuki: Conceptualization is not to be abandoned, or to be given up. We all benefit in this way of understanding, in this interpretation of the Fall, benefit from its "evil." We ought to be glad of that. They say we were "expelled" from Eden but as the result of the expulsion we have acquired the conceptualizing faculty.

As long as we were in Eden we were like animals. (There we were angels; angels are just as good, just as bad, as cats and dogs, plants and so on.) But we were expelled. The very fact of being expelled awakened in us the consciousness of good and bad. Dualistic consciousness. And because of this consciousness of good and bad we strive to save ourselves from this dualism and "crucify" ourselves, and the dualism is destroyed. But we don't stop there. We are resurrected. Unless there is the fact of resurrection, Christianity doesn't mean anything. Just because of this fact of the resurrection, Christianity has its own worth.

If I may refer to Shin Buddhism again, "Gokuraku" is the Pure Land, the Land of Happiness. They talk about our being born in the Land of Happiness after death. But in fact I say there are no persons in the Land of Happiness. If they were living in the Land of Happiness they would be selfish people, just as we were in the Garden of Eden. But as soon as they are born in the Land of Happiness, they come back to this world and suffer with the people, and work and labor for them, and with them. We may not be conscious of it but this is the very fact of our working hard. I often talk now about Christ's saying: "If you go in a company of three, one of them is myself." That verifies that Christ did not stay hidden but comes down on earth. Yet Christian people generally aren't conscious of that fact.

Buddhism talks about how we are working for others and with others to improve the human state of existence. Some are conscious of it, some are not conscious of it. But at the same time we all expect, after death (though there is no death in fact, but after death, speaking temporally) to go to Heaven, the Land of Happiness and enjoy ourselves there. But enjoyment in the Land of Happiness is *here*, where we are working hard for ourselves, and for others.

King: But in the long run what is the difference between saying "Man is essentially good, but his goodness is hidden from him by thick walls of ignorance, which must be removed," or saying, "Man has in him an original nature which is now covered by sin, but the sin needs to be removed"? How does this distinction of vocabulary work out differently in a *religious* sense?

Suzuki: When Buddhism talks about ignorance that does not mean ignorance is "bad." Ignorance is awakening to *relative* knowledge. So ignorance does not really mean ignorance; because of ignorance we have enlightenment. So ignorance is not sin. Ignorance is what we ought to have in order to get enlightenment. If in fact any time we see *ignorance*, there is also enlightenment underneath.

When God created the world and inspected all those things, he said, "Well, all is good" and he was pleased. That "good" does not mean dualistic good. That good transcends the ordinary division of "good" and "bad." And "original sin" is not so bad as most Christians think. For just *because* of original sin we strive to get rid of original sin being sin.

King: You are perhaps saying then that a consciousness of sin carries in it a knowledge of a goodness, greater and beyond it, that would not arise without that sense of sin?

Suzuki: Yes. But there is another thing in which Christianity and Buddhism differ. (Of course there are many, many such points.) To my way of thinking Christianity is possessed with the idea of *power*. This comes from the Judaistic idea of God's commands. God gives commands. And because of those commands there are violations of commands. And because of violations there is punishment. And punishment is to be atoned for. Christ had to atone for all of us. This is the idea of power.

King: What kind of power?

Suzuki: Despotic power! (*Laughter*) Because you see, according to

this Judaistic idea of God, God is the most powerful creature, no, not creature but the most powerful God himself. And that power is on the same level as our secular idea of power.

King: But there is another aspect of this matter. In the Christian view of history God is seeking to redeem a world somehow gone bad. Therefore Christians in general have been greatly concerned with the actualization of goodness in time and space. And since history is always moving onward man must seek to work with God in achieving a world better than this present one. And this zeal to see the good realized in concrete historical shape has been in part behind Christianity's drive to manifest itself in historical, political, and social forms.

Suzuki: Well, the greatness of Christ lies in this: He *rebelled* against the idea of power, the idea of law. But at the same time there is still the reminiscence of power running underneath Christianity. For instance, Rudolf Otto talks about the numinous, the idea of overwhelming divine power. The "numinous": the idea (of power) is still clinging there. God is so powerful you can't reach him, you can't see him.

But the Buddhist idea of love is more universal. God is often included in it; he is not set apart. Realizing this goodness in time and space is a human illusion, but an illusion which we pursue nevertheless. Now although things are to be realized in time and space, at the same time, time and space are illusions.

We are enjoying that goodness which God pronounced when he saw all those things he had created. *That* kind of goodness we are enjoying while we are doing something good in the middle of the world's evils, that transcendental goodness we might say. We just hold it within us.

King: Is the very fact of existing and living joyfully itself a realization of this goodness?

Suzuki: Yet we are living in time and space. We create time and space ourselves. To that extent here and now is eternity itself.

King: But with regard to your reference to Rudolf Otto, one more thing needs to be said. Rudolf Otto says, as you will recall, that as one approaches the sacred or divine, there are two movements which tend to counteract each other and in the end produce a unique something which he calls religious "awe." The first movement is that one tends to draw back in terror from God, and yet at the same time he is attracted. There is fascination as well as fear.

One example of this is the call of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

He senses the presence of God, and says "Woe is me!" and is on the point of running away, out of fear. And yet at the same time he *remains*. And the result is he hears a voice that comes saying: "Whom shall we send?" So here is the moment, compounded of fear *and* fascination. And therefore in the fear, the terror, of God is also the promise of God's goodness and love, an attraction on the part of the person *toward* God.

Suzuki: That is very good, that is fine. I did not think of that word "fascination." Fear, backed by fascination. Just because we fear we want to see. In Japanese we say: Those horrid things are so attractive! Just because they are horrid we like to go and see them.

King: And here is perhaps the sense of the *ultimate* challenge to man's existence, man the creature standing over against the ultimate Reality and feeling abashed and afraid and feeling his creatureliness; and yet at the same time feeling what we might call a kinship with this Ultimate. And so he remains. And Otto would say that out of this compound is born the essence of worship.

Suzuki: The sense of worship, that's not so prominent in Buddhism as in Christianity.

King: This represents to me one of the most fascinating of the contrasts between Christianity and Buddhism—where does one place the quality of *transcendence*?

Now Christianity tries to do this on the basis of a Transcendent Being who is thought of in personal positive terms; Buddhism is less willing, at least in its Mahāyāna form, to specify where *its* transcendence lies. What would you say is the locus of *Buddhist* transcendence, or its *form*, if one can say that it has a form?

Suzuki: That's a very difficult question. But the main thing is frank talk between Christians and Buddhists without getting offended—open-minded, open-hearted we should talk together. And nowadays we have more chances for this kind of talk between Christians and Buddhists. And we are glad that such a time is here.

I still remember when I was very young, about 16 or 17, a Christian missionary called Griffiths wrote about the "Japanese Mikado Empire" was it? I don't remember. Perhaps those books are now altogether discarded. There was a book in which he talked about there being so much "idolatry" in Buddhism and how all such heathen things ought to be burned. But nowadays the discussions are happy.

Christians are willing to listen to Buddhists talk, and Buddhist also are willing to learn about Christianity.

King: There are many books on Zen nowadays which suggest that to study Zen intellectually at all is a destruction of the essential quality of life which Zen represents. One should plunge forthwith into meditation. What do you think of this?

Suzuki: Most Western books on Zen are of no help, they are not my Zen anyway. But if you have time this fall, we can make arrangements to talk again.

(To be continued)