

Reality is Act

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I AM most happy to be given this opportunity to speak before you. Unfortunately, I am growing quite deaf, and my voice does not carry very far. And then my energy gives out sooner these days, so that I hope you will excuse me if I sit through my talk to you this morning.

While I was having breakfast a while ago I was told that a friend of mine whom I had looked forward to seeing here could not be with us. And the reason for his absence, I understand, is due to the fact that he is afraid of flying. Planes fly too rapidly, and he has a certain feeling that his soul is being left behind without being able to catch up with his body. He is not alone in this feeling. I know of another who once described a similar sensation he experienced. Perhaps it is a strange thought to some of us, yet it is understandable when we have been taught to associate the soul with something light and airy which in our afterlife ascends or floats to heaven. And this association is evidently imbedded in our unconscious. This is at least my supposition. For somehow we have come to conceive the idea that the body is separate from the soul. This is no doubt an intellectual illusion. And out of this illusion we have created a certain unnecessary feeling. Illusion or not, the feeling is there just the same, and we are annoyed by it.

According to the Buddhist teaching, all our troubles come from our conceptualizing reality. Concept-making is really at the basis of all our problems. Now, it is convenient to think of a soul and a body as separate. But in reality,

* This is the basis for a talk given by the late Dr. Suzuki. The date is unknown. We wish to thank the Matsugaoka Library of Kamakura for permission to use it here. We have provisionally supplied the present title and have also made slight editorial revisions in the text.—Eds.

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there is no separation in our act between the two. There is no soul and no body when we act. In act, the soul and body are one; we cannot speak of the soul here and the body there.

Religious people might say, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." But that is while they are thinking about the difference. As soon as they begin to act, that distinction is forgotten and they work as a complete, undivided whole. This "act" is most important. I was reading Goethe's *Faust* again recently, and I came upon the statement, "In the beginning was action" or "act" (*die Tat*). I would like to say that this *Tat* is everything. Animals, plants, inorganic and organic beings just "act." They neither reason nor conceptualize. For instance, a dog when hungry goes to the food and eats. He makes no critical analysis of the food. He eats. Similarly, a cat when hungry and smelling something fine in the neighborhood will go for it, perhaps bringing back with her one of the neighbor's fish. Reasoning does not take place in her that the fish belongs to the neighbor, and that stealing is bad, and so on. She does not ask why her neighbor cat eats better than she does. She simply eats her fill, and when finished, all right, good-bye. "Act" is everything. Cats and dogs—they are in the Garden of Eden. There is no distinguishing bad from good, right from wrong; there is no separation.

But such is not the case with human beings. We have knowledge and consciousness, and consciousness means to separate ourselves from the object of reflection. This begins the process of knowing, of analytical thinking, of science. The "world" comes out of this separation. If there is no separation there would be no advance or progress—whatever we may mean by this. As long as we remained in Eden, there was no progress, for we did what we, he or she, wanted to do. There was no separation in willing or motivating, or putting motivation into action. Everything went on, and *it was good*.

But somehow the serpent appeared. And we were all driven out of Eden as the result. I repeat, *we* were driven out. For you and I were there. We may not have any memory of it but the fact is deeply buried in our unconscious. The rise of consciousness or the serpent's appearance developed "knowledge" and with it came the start of conceptualization. God saw this and drove us out of Eden into what Buddhists call *sbaba sekai* "the world of patience or suffering." This world of ours is the "world of knowledge." Yet our having gained "knowledge" is not a sin as some people might think. For because of it the

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past is remembered and the future anticipated. Our being able to divide time into past, present, and future is most significant, for time is at the very basis of our knowledge. And along with the question of time comes the question of space.

But what we have done again is to make a conceptual separation between time and space. In reality time is space, and space is time. For the convenience of logic, we separate the two.

In fact, we live in the present. What is most actual is the present. The past is gone, the future is not yet here. But the present cannot be counted or measured by time. As soon as we say "now" or "this is the present," that present is past. So what we generally think to be the present has no meaning whatever. We might say it is like a geometrical point, or a zero point.

Now this idea of a zero is most important. Zero is not a nothing. From the present, which can be likened to a geometric point without dimensions, we think of the past, we start on the future, there is a beginning, there is an end. In theology we speak of eschatology where we are given to believe in a beginning and an ending. But actually there is no beginning or no ending. We are living an endless present, a beginningless present. In this present are included all that we think started in the past and all that is to take place in the future. Again this is what we think, and these thoughts are but concepts. This is all conceptual play. Reality is act.

Kant has somewhere: "Concepts without intuition are empty, and intuition without concepts is blind." This is a most significant saying. Concepts must always be accompanied or backed by intuition, and intuition by concepts. They must go hand in hand. And when they go together, there is act. In act we see the inseparability of intuition, feeling, or sensing and concepts, which characterizes the life in the Garden of Eden. This life is at the basis of all human spirituality.

But the fact is we human beings cannot be just beings of act. We are discriminative and analyze an act by dividing it into intuition and concept. Conceptualization is human and necessary, for without it we cannot go on living as we do in this world of good and bad, right and wrong. At the same time, what great damage is done by our conceptualization! This is the curse of life, and also a blessing. Strange, is it not—blessing and curse, wickedness and goodness—they all go together. They are contradictions, yet without con-

tradiction we cannot go on living. That is the condition in which we live. In act contradiction becomes non-contradictory—they are identified. Hamlet has “To be or not to be, that is the question.” But really our life consists in being and in not-being at once. Thus the question is not To be or not to be but To-be-~~and~~-not-to-be. The question is solved in our actually living where being is becoming and becoming is being. When we say “to be” it becomes static because “to be” exists only in our concept. There really is no “to be.” Everything is becoming, or, we might say, everything is moving on from being to not-being, from A to not-A, from this to not-this. That is to say, we are living the contradiction, a series of continuous contradictions. When these contradictions are identified in act, all is well, all goes on smoothly.

We come back to the soul trying to catch up with the body. They are not two, but one, identical. The term “identify” however may bring to mind something logically separable into two. What I mean is something always in a state of indivisible totality. Our returning to this state of totalistic, indivisible identity is the way to “regain paradise.”

In fact we have never lost paradise. We are always carrying paradise along with this world of knowledge. It is not to regain a lost paradise but to rediscover it and to realize that it has been with us all the time. We can never disunite ourselves from Eden. Paradise is always right here. It's just that we do not look back, that is, look within. We forget in much the same way, so that we imagine we have left our soul somewhere, and we feel troubled.

Sometime ago, in the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* (Vol. II No. 1, Winter, 1962), I found an article on “The Sense of Subjectivity.” It was fascinating and I read it with great interest. But most of these scientists just miss the point. They come to the very object of their research and then stop just before they really have it. They call that reality an “abyss,” “nihil,” or “nothingness,” a kind of bottomless abyss. They stand at the edge of the precipice and look down, afraid to jump right into the abyss itself. They hesitate, talk about it, and walk around it waiting for a final decision to come about. But the decision never comes to a decision. It is you who must decide, and not “decision.” This is all due to conceptualization. Conceptualization ought to be left behind, or better, one must plunge with it right into the abyss itself.

There is a story about the Buddha when he was struggling to solve the

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problem of life, reality, or we might say, the soul. Buddha could not remember the last line of a verse uttered by a preceding Buddha that contained in it the key to the ultimate solution which he so desperately needed. He struggled hard to recall but in vain. Suddenly, there appeared a devil before him who said, "I know the line you earnestly seek. But I am hungry and I wish to eat you up. If you will give yourself up to me, I will tell you what you wish to know." Buddha said, "All right, I will let you eat me. But first you must tell me the missing line, for it will be no use to me after I die." The devil agreed and told him the needed words. Then Buddha submitted to his fate. As he jumped into the devil's mouth, lo! he found himself sitting on the lotus flower. (The story as it is given here may not be exact, but the signification is all here: "When man comes to an extremity, the way opens all by itself," "Man's extremity is God's opportunity," or biblically, "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.")

Another story comes to mind of an old woman in a remote part of Japan who may be still alive today. A devotee of the Pure Land Sect of Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū), she was told that whether we practiced good deeds or bad deeds it made no difference since we were all, without exception, bound for hell. If this is so, she thought, it was an inescapable fate awaiting us, so why not go straight to the place of destiny without tarrying? The matter being settled in her mind, she made directly for that baneful realm. I do not think she knew where that was, but anyhow it was somewhere other than the world in which she lived. But the instant she threw herself down into hell, she found herself resting on the lotus flower.

This final leap, the last decision, is act. This act is what is most needed. And this act does not stop at having made a conceptual decision—Shall I? or Shall I not? It is like the cat stealing the fish, or the dog eating a piece of meat—just act itself. Here decision is act and act is decision.

By this I do not mean to propound a state of animalism for homo sapiens. We all remain our own kind, that is, as apple-eaters who have come to discriminate and evaluate. The point is that we must awaken ourselves to the realization that we all still have something of "innocence" with us, in us, which was not left behind in Eden. It is for us now to bring it out into the field of consciousness.

Actually, I wrote out a paper so that I might say something about Zen.

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But I seem to be far from the contents of it now ! But really, what I have been saying all this time is Zen itself.

Zen started in India but it matured in China around the 8th century. One advantage it had in being introduced into China was that in contrast to the speculative and high-soaring thinking of the Indian mind, the Chinese are an agricultural people whose feet are planted solidly on the great mother earth. They never forget the ground on which they tread. So when Zen took root in Chinese soil, that meant that concept and intuition got happily wedded, for Zen is nothing else but this unification.

I want to tell one more story especially for the doctors in the audience. In 12th century China there lived a great poet, statesman, and scholar named Sotoba (Su Tung-po) who once wrote a kind of inscription on a painting. It told of a sick man who called in one doctor after another to be cured of his illness. Each doctor would examine him and following a diagnosis prescribe a set remedy saying it was good for this part or that part. But the patient showed no improvement. Then one day a doctor known for his wonderful healing power was asked in for consultation. He did not do or say anything. He just sat quietly, and after a while he left. Some time later, the sick man recovered fully. Now they all marvelled over the wonderful doctor who cured without administering any specific medicine. The famous doctor was asked what method he used for his healing. And he replied, "You are all generally too specialized and too analytical. You must always specify this point or that point all in accordance to your own conceptual diagnosis. The patient is thus divided into so many concepts, each receiving a set treatment regardless of its relation to the health of the patient's whole body. But I do nothing in particular. I just find out the source of the trouble. The trouble was that he was sick and he needed to lie down quietly for awhile." One of the specialists asked, "Then what use is there of studying the science of medicine?" And the doctor said, "The science of medicine is of great value as it is. What I have done is to synthesize all your methods in a totalistic way. Specialized treatments become ineffectual when the center is forgotten, the center which is the spirit of being."

Thank you.