

Aspects of D.T. Suzuki's Early Interpretations of Buddhism and Zen

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FOR reasons soon to become evident, I begin with somebody else's leave-taking—or more accurately, “parting-shot”:

I take leave of my subject, which I make bold to say, I have endeavored to elucidate honestly and impartially. I have striven to do justice to everything that is good and true in Buddhism. But in the interest of truth I have to confess, that the above given facts will bear me out in the assertion, that Buddhism is after all neither better nor worse than any other religion built up by man; it is a science without inspiration, a religion without God, a body without a spirit, unable to regenerate, cheerless, cold, dead and deplorably barren of results. Can these dry bones live?

So Ernest J. Eitel, a Christian missionary, author, and critic of the Mahayana, in *Buddhism: Its Historical, Theoretical and Popular Aspects*, published in London in 1884. In what follows I propose to discuss the background and beginnings of D. T. Suzuki's lengthy career as interpreter of Buddhism and Zen in the twentieth century by describing the manner and way of his specific response to the kind of challenge Eitel's judgment implied. There will, I think, be a few surprises for those addicted to the “later Suzuki” and to “floating-cloud-in-the-sky Zen.”

Indeed, perhaps because American popular and scholarly interest in Zen Buddhism is a relatively recent phenomenon—emerging after World War II and peaking in the decade of the fifties—it has been widely assumed that Suzuki, Zen's greatest and most prolific proponent, who died in 1966 at the age of ninety-five, was somehow himself a singularly modern phenomenon, belonging in a special way to a generation of Americans eager to understand and appropriate the message of Zen for the West. While it is true that there

are aspects of Suzuki's thought more American than the scholarly mind would dare imagine, the assumption is erroneous and merits correction for several important reasons. In the first place, it renders the American understanding of Zen, which is after all still largely a matter of the understanding of Suzuki, even riskier than it need be. Secondly it ignores the fact that Suzuki's writings on Zen should be viewed within the larger framework of his interpretation of Buddhism—and of religion in general—despite his own latter-day injunctions to the contrary. And finally, the assumption excludes from critical awareness the long period of discipleship and preparation which provided Suzuki with the goals of his life's work and during which he fashioned and refined the methods he was later to employ so commandingly in his interpretation of Zen. Suzuki's "American" career began not in the fifties but fully half a century earlier, and in an intellectual atmosphere vastly different from that of the post-World-War II years. His work had its roots in the late nineteenth century, for which reason its continuity and development into the twentieth century may well be the single most important—and most neglected—factor in the scholarly assessment of his message and mission.

It should also be noted in setting forth the issues to which this paper is directed that Japanese Buddhist scholars have asserted with incontrovertible reason that Suzuki's writings in English do not fully express his thought. True as that is, it remains to be said that there are certain aspects of his work which can be most fully understood *only by a Westerner*—and perhaps particularly by an American—for the simple reason that Suzuki was expressing his ideas in English, to Westerners, within a Western frame of reference, for the purpose of gaining their interest and assent as the necessary preliminary to undertaking the higher task of uniting East and West in the quest for truth and the satisfaction of every man's deepest spiritual longings. And for this high task Suzuki was schooled not in Japan but in America. With this assertion, however, still another qualification is called for: Suzuki was also a reformer of his own tradition, as jarring as that may be to certain notions of his "transcendental point of view." In fact, his mission was directed to the East as well as to the West. Ultimately, and indeed from the beginning, Suzuki was after truth, not a following, although he had been led to believe by his mentors Soyen Shaku and Paul Carus that there were men of intelligence, good will, and the "modernizing spirit" who would see the rightness of his message.

Suzuki's seventy-five-year career falls naturally into three phases or periods which may be designated as (1) the period of discipleship and preparation, from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the mid-twenties of this century, during which time Suzuki's central concerns were the defense and justification of Buddhism in the West and its reform and unification in the East; (2) the period of scholarship, from the twenties to the end of World War II, during which time he was occupied with the translation and interpretation of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese texts of Buddhism; and (3) the period of mastery, from his return to the West in 1949 until his death in Japan in 1966, during which time Suzuki was called upon again and again to give *the* Buddhist point of view on various contemporary issues and in the light of which he seemingly *re*-interpreted his interpretations of Buddhism and Zen. I shall discuss only the first and formative period of Suzuki's career, and because of the limitations of space and time only a few selected aspects of that. The danger is, of course, that the surgery will kill the patient, although for myself that has not been the case. On the contrary, the early writings of Suzuki hold a high place in my estimation precisely because they show him making his way to Zen's mountain top, from which he was to survey the world around him for so long and with such apparent ease.

I

The period of Suzuki's youth and early training in Zen should prove a rich field of investigation for his biographer—indeed, anyone with a flair for the dramatic will be fascinated by the way in which situations and events—and Suzuki's own sense of karma—contrived to shape his life and career. For his own reminiscences of this period I refer you to an extremely revelatory article published in the English Buddhist journal *Middle Way* in 1964.¹ I shall confine myself simply to stating that Suzuki's youth was a period of intellectual and spiritual turmoil; that he had several significant contacts with Christianity; that when he turned to his native Zen for the solution to his troubles he got virtually nowhere for years, for although his emotions were engaged his intellect

¹ "Early Memories," *Middle Way*, XXXIX (November, 1964), 101-108. This article was prepared by Carmen Blacker and Mihoko Okamura from notes taken during several interviews with Suzuki, who was then ninety-five.

proved balky (the results of which fact are to be seen everywhere in his writings); and that it was only when his second Zen master, the modern, Western-influenced Soyen Shaku, offered by his own personal example a synthesis of intellectual competence and spiritual attainment—plus the concrete opportunity of going to America to help build an East-West bridge of truth-seeking—that Suzuki at last achieved his spiritual breakthrough in *satori*.

It was, strictly speaking, in 1893 at the World's Parliament of Religions that Suzuki's American career began, for it was there that Soyen delivered a paper on Buddhism which Suzuki had translated into English for him and there that Paul Carus, Suzuki's American mentor, met Soyen and initiated the relationship which eventuated in the coming to America of Suzuki himself in 1897. The following excerpt from a letter of Soyen in response to one from Carus on the subject dearest to their hearts will serve in lieu of a lengthy exposition to indicate the particular intellectual-religious spirit from which Soyen dispatched Suzuki to America and into which Paul Carus received him:

"I quite agree to your idea of forming a new organization in order to carry on with the activities started at the World's Parliament of Religions. This 19th century of ours is the preparatory stage for a religious reformation. It is incumbent on us who believe in the reformation to eradicate the folly of sticking to delusions, and to enhance the glory of the truth. . . . Now is the time for us to try conclusions with old conventional religions, with the spirit of philosophy and science as our shield, and the motto of universal benevolence and brotherhood as our halberd. Before the truth there should never be such discriminations as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, much less the difference of races, customs or languages. I ardently wish the success of this new organization, and hope that the day will come shortly when all religions in the world will be united together.²

Although sent by Soyen specifically for the purpose of assisting Carus in translating Chinese religious texts into English, Suzuki became as well Carus' apprentice in the task of preparing for publication the two journals which

² Quoted in Shōkin Furuta, "Shaku Soen: The Footsteps of a Modern Zen Master," trans. Sumiko Kudo, *Philosophical Studies of Japan*, VIII (1967), 90.

Carus edited, the *Open Court* and *Momist*. Unquestionably, Carus' prolific pen and huge capacity for work inspired Suzuki who was twenty-odd years later to undertake almost single-handedly the publication in Japan of an English-language journal devoted to the propagation of "basic Buddhism." I refer to the *Eastern Buddhist*, which was strikingly similar in style, format, and content to Carus' journals. Good German that he was, Paul Carus made a hard task-master. Suzuki's description of his duties at the Open Court is less than enthusiastic. In a letter to Soyen dated August 9, 1900, he wrote to answer to his master's inquiries:

"It is not my task to write for the *Open Court* regularly. When there is need for a review concerning Japan or for an essay related to Buddhism, only then do I take up my pen upon the request of Dr. Carus. My position in this Company is that of proofreader proper, who, mediating between printers and writers, is engaged in every task relating to the dictionary, finding misplaced words and blanks, lengthening or shortening sentences, or making corrections in spelling, etc. Whereas it is a slightly better position than that of a Japanese proofreader, it is the same in its slavish nature.³

But Suzuki's karma was working for him again; what seemed for the time another blind alley not only outfitted him for his remarkable career as editor of the *Eastern Buddhist*, but also soon opened out into a wider career as a creative thinker in the course of which he far outstripped the accomplishments of either Soyen or Carus, and which, while building on their goals and ideas of essential truth and streamlined religion, infused them with a new and different sort of life.⁴

It was at this same time that Suzuki wrote at length to Soyen concerning his deeper thoughts about his mission in life and how it might be pursued:

³ Quoted in Shōjun Bando, "D. T. Suzuki's Life in La Salle," *Eastern Buddhist*, New Series, II (August, 1967), 142.

⁴ Carus' ideas may be found throughout the pages of the journals he edited, as well as in numerous books. Soyen's major contribution to East-West dialogue is *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, translated and heavily edited by Suzuki and published by Carus at the Open Court in 1906.

“*Innen* (karmic relations) are indeed beyond our thought. An idea that has no immediate effect, after being received by somebody may later be of help to him in entering the Way of Enlightenment—all of a sudden flashing across his mind. . . . I am not particularly fond of argument, but as I am firmly convinced of the above-mentioned truth, I express my thoughts occasionally. It is my secret wish that, if my thoughts are beneficial to the progress of humanity, good fruits will, without fail, grow from them in the future. . . . It is precisely because of my belief in this truth that I attempt to express my conviction for the general public. It is by no means for taking pride in showing off my own views to the world, but because I am fully convinced that, even though untruth may be mixed with what I say, the modicum of truth contained in my views, just like the parable of a grain of wheat mentioned in the Bible, is sure to grow steadily to cover the whole of heaven and earth. This is because truth is neither owned by me nor by others, independent of all, through and through, and yet the one thing to be followed equally by others as well as by myself. . . .⁵

The point of view is, of course, fundamentally Buddhist, and yet there are Western qualities already admixed—a biblical metaphor unselfconsciously chosen, progress and evolution assumed, rational argument accepted, the objective quest for truth espoused—in short, that great nineteenth-century Trinity of Reason, Progress, and Truth. Suzuki would not always express himself so optimistically, but these are convictions he never wholly abandoned despite the chastening experiences of two world wars and a radical change in the Western climate of opinion, to which he sought always to address himself.

As early as 1899 Suzuki was preparing to express his thoughts in what was to be his first major original work in any language, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. Apologetic in purpose, it was Suzuki's first departure from the guidelines laid down by Soyen and Paul Carus in their writings on basic Buddhism. Thus, in the *Outlines* Suzuki took up the argument for developed Mahayana Buddhism where it purportedly lay—in intellectual disgrace. Whereas Soyen and Paul Carus had chosen the option of representing Buddhism simplistically and

⁵ Quoted in Bando, p. 145.

“modernly” as a unified whole, virtually ignoring the fact of innumerable schools and sects and stressing its rationality and ethical grandeur, Suzuki attempted to interpret the varieties of Buddhism constructively. In order to do so he developed a theory of organic growth and a philosophy of religion as subjective experience which he was to advocate without significant modification throughout his career. The point is crucial, by analyzing and tracing these views a fundamental continuity emerges which might otherwise be lost to sight in the profusion of topics to which Suzuki addressed himself over the years. It is for this reason that I disagree with the contention of Alan Watts as it applies to the nature of this book, and indeed to Suzuki’s work as a whole. Watts wrote in the prefatory essay to a recent American edition of the *Outlines*:

Although Dr. Suzuki speaks here of Buddhism as a religion, this is only in the most vague and general sense of the term. For the study of its disciplines has nothing to resemble the considerations which would influence one to be a Roman Catholic rather than a Baptist, or vice versa. The real concerns of Buddhism are closer to psychotherapy, or even to something such as ophthalmology, than to the choice between differing systems of belief which we recognize in the West as adopting a religion. A convert to Buddhism is as unimaginable as a convert to cookery, unless the conversion simply means that one has become a cook instead of a cobbler, or that one has become interested in cooking well.⁶

This particular kind of separation between Eastern “realization” and Western “religion” has ceased to serve any useful purpose, although Suzuki himself did fall under its spell for a time, during his “psychoanalytic period.” Clearly, there are elements of realization and religion in both traditions. And equally clearly, Suzuki was more than vaguely interested in the latter. The real point for understanding Suzuki is not whether Buddhism is or is not a religion, but rather *what the essential elements of true religion are*. It is precisely on this point that Watts and many other Western students of Suzuki’s writings

⁶ *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1963), x-xi. The *Outlines* was first published in 1907.

go astray. Whenever it is forgotten that Suzuki formulated his basic convictions in the late nineteenth-century milieu, at a time when as he thought all clear-sighted men understood *religion* to be a quintessential core of truth and experience quite properly divested of its accidental trappings, the balanced understanding of his work and its purpose is seriously jeopardized.

In fact, the Outline is neither credalism nor a free-floating vision of the Real. Rather it is a systematic defense of the Mahayana in the name of essential but *living* religion. Furthermore, it was at the time of its writing directed to readers in the East as well as in the West, since Suzuki hoped it would be used by Soyen in Japan where the reformation of Buddhism was a prime goal. Abjuring any sort of historical treatment of the Mahayana whereby attention would be called unduly to its controversial and dogmatic phases "at the sacrifice of its true spirit," Suzuki took up in the *Outlines* the question of the genuineness of the Mahayana religion. It is on this issue that he developed most fully his notion of organic growth. Taking as his point of departure the flat denial on the part of Western Pali scholars to admit any substantial validity to the Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese texts of Buddhism, Suzuki asserts:

... What religion is there in the whole history of mankind that has not made any development whatever, that has remained the same, like the granite, throughout its entire course? Let us ask whether there is any religion which has shown some signs of vitality and yet retained its primitive form intact and unmodified in every respect. Is not changeableness, that is susceptibility to irritation, the most essential sign of vitality? Every organism grows, which means a change in some way or other. There is no form of life to be found anywhere on earth, that does not grow or change, or that has not any inherent power of adjusting itself to the surrounding conditions.⁷

Suzuki presses his argument even to the point of rejecting the applicability of historical considerations to religion. While the immediate cause for his remarks, that is, the Western lack of respect for the Mahayana, is plain enough, Suzuki kept his irreverent attitude toward history throughout his life, and was, of course, repeatedly taken to task for it. As such, it probably constitutes

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

his one real failure in his efforts to understand the West. In any case, here he speaks with total scorn of the archeological curiosity shop and declares:

Mahayanism is not an object of historical curiosity. Its vitality and activity concern us in our daily life. It is a great spiritual organism; its moral and religious forces are still exercising an enormous power over millions of souls; and its further development is sure to be a very valuable contribution to the world-progress of the religious consciousness. What does it matter, then, whether or not Mahayanism is the genuine teaching of the Buddha?⁸

So much for history of religions! Nevertheless, the argument from evolution is deceptive, for in a fundamental sense Suzuki was not interested in it beyond its apologetic utility—as most of his later writings on Zen prove. By background, temperament, and circumstances, Suzuki was committed to the quest for eternal essences, so that the “world-progress of the religious consciousness” was really for him a voyage of discovery and not of innovation. Suzuki’s understanding of true religion, then, is *actually based on the distinction between form and spirit*. In the *Outlines* he defines the spirit of religion as “that element in religion which remains unchanged throughout its successive stages of development and transformation”—a formless core which must be experienced to be known; and its form as “the external shell which is subject to any modification required by circumstances.”⁹ The position is, of course—accepting the denial of history—virtually impregnable, and Suzuki goes on to spin out the complexities of Mahayana doctrine with his eye ever on the formless but living essence.

II

When he was thirty-eight years old Suzuki embarked upon a new phase of his career as interpreter of Buddhism to the West. Ending his eleven-year apprenticeship at the Open Court, he left La Salle in 1908 en route to Japan. After a short stay in New York, which he had visited previously in the company of Soyen Shaku, Suzuki sailed for the Continent. In France he spent several

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

months at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris researching and copying the Tun-huang manuscripts of Mahayana Buddhism. Following a tour through Germany, Suzuki went to London to perform a second task, the translation into Japanese of Emanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, made at the request of the Swedenborg Society during the winter of 1908-1909.

At this time Suzuki's long personal association with the Buddhist Society of England was inaugurated with a public lecture entitled "The Development of Mahayana Buddhism."¹⁰ While this lecture does no more than broadly recapitulate the point of view and conclusions of the *Outlines*, it is noteworthy for its open advocacy of Buddhist reform and ecumenicism, presumably for the reason that Suzuki was addressing an audience composed of avowed Buddhists and sympathetic inquirers. Moreover, since it was the Pali texts of Buddhism and their predominantly ethical interpretation as advanced by such English scholars of Buddhism as T. W. Rhys-Davids that was then best known and appreciated in England, Suzuki is here concerned to pay due respect to the Hinayana's strict adherence to the *Vinaya* discipline, which he acknowledges to have been overly subordinated to speculative interest in the development of the Mahayana.

Accordingly, Suzuki proposes as a model for reform and reunion the perfect balance of moral, contemplative, and intellectual elements which, as he insists, characterized "the original spirit" of the Buddha. Again, and on the basis of his theory of organic growth, he is not concerned to enter the scholarly debate over the authentic teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the available texts, but rather is he concerned to re-discover that core of essentially formless truth which he sees as underlying and vivifying every form of Buddhism, regardless of the historical moment of its appearance. By thus transcending the knotty issue of validating "true Buddhism," Suzuki is able not only to approve both the Hinayana and Mahayana developments within Buddhism, but also to propose their reconciliation at a higher level:

To realize the perfect type of Buddhism, the threefold treasure, Triratna, must be equally developed; the Buddha, the Dharma and

¹⁰ *Buddhist Review*, I (January, 1909), 103-118; *Monist*, XXIV (October, 1914), 565-581. Citations are from the *Monist*.

¹¹ "Development," p. 567.

the Sangha must stand side by side imbued with the same spirit as when they were first established, whatever outward transformation they might have undergone according to varying circumstances. If the Hinayana is said to have the Sangha in its model form, the Mahayana may be considered to have fully developed the Dharma, that is, the religio-philosophical signification of Buddhism; while both schools claim the Buddha as their common founder. The problem that faces faithful Buddhists at present is how best to effect a complete reconciliation of the moral disciplines of Hinayana with the speculations of Mahayana.¹²

It is important to note that under what is a favorite umbrella-term for Suzuki, "speculations," he subsumes religion and philosophy as distinguished from ethics. It is this distinction—to be understood only relatively, however—which constitutes the basis of his differentiation between Hinayana and Mahayana, and it has the advantage of being sufficiently flexible a notion to permit the desired synthesis of the forms of Buddhism.

Suzuki next takes up the persistent issue of the Mahayana's philosophical nihilism. Following a discussion of the notions of soul, God, and revelation, he states:

. . . The ultimate logical sequence of all these necessarily negative statements could not be anything else but the conception of Suchness. Beyond this, one enters into mysticism; philosophy must bow her head by herself into an unknown wilderness, or to Eckhart's *stille Düsternisse* or *Wüste*, or to Boehme's *Abgrund*;—this is the realm of "Eternal Yea," or, which is the same thing, the realm of "Eternal Nay."¹³

That philosophical activity logically and inevitably culminates in suprarational intuition is a crucial point for Suzuki, for it provides the justification for his assertion that the Mahayana is, above all, *religious*. Furthermore, the identification of the essence of religion with mystical intuition opens a way for him to show how the pervasive negativism of Mahayana thought is merely

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 569.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

preparatory to absolute affirmation, essentially the same as that of the Christian mystics. The priority of religious affirmation in contrast to philosophical negation in Suzuki's work is basic. In his view philosophy always "must bow her head" to religion at the limits of reflection:

Vidya must now give way to *dhyaana* or *prajna*; that is, intellection must become intuition, which is after all the ultimate form of all religious discipline. Mysticism is the life of religion. Without it religion loses her reason of existence; all her warm vitality departs, all her inexpressible charm vanishes, and there remains nothing but the crumbling bones and cold ashes of death.¹⁴

And because mystical intuition is the life of religion and its true reason of existence, Suzuki can claim that the Mahayana is the logical culmination of the Hinayana; that is, a further unfolding of the religious consciousness, in which sense *both* Hinayana and Mahayana may be said to reach their fullest realization in mysticism. Consequently it is nonsense to speak of two Buddhisms, and Suzuki concludes his lecture with an implicit summons to the higher unity:

... The time is coming nearer when each [Hinayana and Mahayana] will fully realize and candidly admit its own shortcomings, though not oblivious of its advantages, and earnestly desire to cooperate with the other in order to bring about a perfect assimilation into one uniform system of Buddhist thought and practice, and to contribute to the promotion of peace and goodwill towards all beings, regardless of racial and national differences.¹⁵

Thus it would seem that the reconciliation Suzuki seeks may be viewed in either of two ways: from one angle of vision a synthesis is achieved by incorporating into the Mahayana system the strong sense of moral discipline and individual responsibility preserved in the Hinayana—the latter's astringent and purificatory character to provide the reform Buddhism needs, and the former its philosophical cohesion and religious satisfaction. But from the second angle of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 572–573.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 581.

vision, the reconciliation is to be sought in transcending every form and development via mystical intuition, or stated rather differently, in *re-discovering the essence* of religion and philosophy and ethics. The reasons for Suzuki's turning almost exclusively to the interpretation of Zen Buddhism in his later career now become clearer: in Zen this essence was to be found in unencumbered purity; moreover, although mystical intuition is to be found universally, *only in Zen*, as he thought, is it to be found in inseparable unity with a moral discipline arduously cultivated in everyday life.

III

Since time does not permit my leading you systematically through the next decade of Suzuki's career and developing in detail the line of argument I have taken, I simply light in Japan in 1917 for a look at one of Suzuki's early interpretations of Zen. Dating from June of 1917 Suzuki contributed a series of popular articles on Zen Buddhism to the magazine *New East*, edited and published by an Englishman in Tokyo for the purpose of drawing East and West together. The magazine proved to be short-lived but these particular articles by Suzuki have enjoyed a long history. According to him, they served as the basis for his first series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, although in an expanded and revised form. In fact, the dependence of the *Essays* on them is rather more indirect, since all the essays of the first series but one were edited reprints of articles of a more scholarly nature appearing in the *Eastern Buddhist* during the years 1921-1925. Eventually, however, the *New East* articles were reprinted in substantially their original form by the Eastern Buddhist Society in 1934, as *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. And as such they have become one of Suzuki's enduringly popular "recent" works, having been re-published half a dozen times in English alone.

The comparative late appearance of these articles in book-form highlights an interesting aspect of Suzuki's career as an author. While it is true that Suzuki was in his sixties by the time he came to be widely read and studied in the West (and, it may be ventured, even older before the Japanese accorded him recognition as the spokesman, par excellence, for Zen), his basic interpretations of Buddhism and Zen had been actually conceived *and* formulated years before. Suzuki's English style has been justly praised for its vigor, freshness, and

unpedantic approach; indeed, some have marveled that so venerable a man could write as youthfully as he did. Without derogating in any way from Suzuki's remarkable achievement in this respect—the style and the man matched wonderfully—it may be pointed out that he began to develop and refine this style while he was still a young man; that many of his “later works” are in fact very early ones; and that he adopted an unpedantic style long before it became fashionable in scholarly circles because he was ardently striving to present the case of Buddhism in its essential truth and living spirit, unobstructed by academic debate over matters historical and doctrinal. It is to be remembered that Suzuki began as an apologist and reformer. The present vitality of Zen and Western interest in it demonstrate how well he argued his case—so decisively in fact that the effort goes largely unacknowledged.

In keeping with its popular approach the *Introduction* is the most aggressive of Suzuki's early English writings. He both exhorts and chastizes the reader, but with an earnestness and lightness of touch that precludes offense. There is a fine balance of interpretation and freely rendered translation from Zen literature (interpretations non-existent in Japan until his English writings began to be translated into Japanese), a combination characteristic of all his later writings, that causes the reader to want to see more and to see again, for there is considerable repetition in Suzuki's writings. In the preliminaries Suzuki once again sets forth his growth analogy for the development of the Mahayana, but his remarks are directed almost entirely to the uniqueness of Zen in contrast to all other Buddhist sects of China and Japan. Zen is presented as directly transmitting the essence and spirit of Buddhism, for which reason personal experience is made central. Indeed, Suzuki here emphasizes “spirit” almost to the exclusion of “essence.” He asserts that no ideas are intelligible without an experiential foundation, and further, that experience alone guarantees accuracy and efficiency in grasping essence. It must be noted, however, that by personal experience Suzuki means *inner spiritual experience*, a qualification which causes him, quite properly, to identify Zen with the mysticism he had previously located at the heart of true religion. In his last years he was to deny this identification in favor of such designations as “radical empiricism” and “naturalism,” possibly solely for the reason that he came to believe the term mysticism carried in the West a conceptual overload he had been unable to unpack successfully, despite years of trying.

Suzuki next elaborates that series of denials, or more accurately, qualifications, which has since become so strongly associated with his interpretation of Zen.¹⁶ Zen is not a philosophy, not a religion, not a form of meditation. The philosophical denial is based on the contention that Zen is no system built upon logic and analysis, by which terms he includes any form of dualistic thinking. This denial is, however, largely a matter of rejecting dogmatism, not a denial of intellectuality, root and branch. And on the question of Zen and religion the denial is, similarly, against the ossification of ultimate reality in dogma, ritual, and priestly mediation, since Zen seeks a higher affirmation beyond all antitheses and freed from "religious encumbrances." And there we are back in the nineteenth century. . . . Perhaps the one denial which is intrinsic to Suzuki's interpretation of Zen is directed against confounding it with meditation. The issue is fundamental for it touches upon what he has all along affirmed philosophically and religiously, namely, that the essential core of true religion is formless, free and absolutely spiritual, but that to meet the demands of the religious consciousness it must needs "work out" actively and vitally in man's temporal progress. For which reasons meditation in the sense of mental fixation is deadly and Suzuki flatly denies it.

There is a real and creative tension in Suzuki's thought between emptiness and form, or better, between truth and life, which he believed is transcended in the affirmation that the truth is *absolutely spiritual* and therefore *living*. In many respects he expresses himself most clearly on this point in his repeated treatment of the Old Testament myths of Creation and Fall, which fascinated him from his boyhood. In any case, Suzuki gives his ultimate allegiance not to pristine Emptiness but to spirit-at-work-in-the-world; indeed, all his cautions and qualifications are for the purpose of letting spirit "work" without

¹⁶ Especially in America. See, for example, the spate of articles on Zen and empiricism or existentialism or pragmatism or naturalism in *Philosophy East and West*. In England where Buddhism is not only studied but has been long practiced by a numerous group under the leadership of Christmas Humphreys, Suzuki's Zen is understood more traditionally and more religiously—and Suzuki's talks to the Buddhist Society have been characteristically ones of shared inquiry and faith. Of course, Suzuki himself to a large degree encouraged the American approach to Zen by his efforts to relate Zen to current topics and attitudes. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this "American approach" rather obscures Suzuki's lifelong quest for essential religion—under whatever name he chose to call it.

any prejudgment or strait-jacketing on the part of man's rational consciousness. I consider it to be a profoundly religious orientation, in the sense of Paul's "Not I, but Christ in me," and on the basis of it Suzuki can say:

The basic idea of Zen is to come in touch with the inner workings of our being, and to do this in the most direct way possible, without resorting to anything external or superadded. . . . Zen professes itself to be the spirit of Buddhism, but in fact it is the spirit of all religions and philosophies. When Zen is thoroughly understood, absolute peace of mind is attained, and a man lives as he ought to live. What more may we hope?¹⁷

Not then, as Soyen and Paul Carus supposed, a new rationalized religion, but the old one infused with new life by virtue of its satisfying universally felt spiritual and emotional needs.

Subsequently and in this connection, Suzuki makes a defense of the functional utility of Zen Buddhism's "superficial irrationality" and asserts its "higher logic" in the name of spiritual freedom and creativity. He was to expend much effort in later years attempting to explain this higher logic philosophically, but the following excerpted declaration lies at the heart of the matter—and at the whole course of his writings on Zen:

So long as we think logic final we are chained, we have no freedom of spirit, and the real facts of life are lost sight of. Now, however, in Zen logic we have the key to the whole situation; we are master of realities; words have given up their domination over us. If we are pleased to call a spade not a spade, we have the perfect right to do so. . . .

Zen thinks we are too much of slaves to words and logic. So long as we remain thus fettered we are miserable and go through untold suffering. But if we want to see something really worth knowing, that is conducive to our spiritual happiness, we must endeavor once for all to free ourselves from all conditions; we must see if we cannot gain a new point of view from which the world can be surveyed in its wholeness

¹⁷ *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 44.

and life comprehended inwardly. This consideration has compelled one to plunge oneself deep into the abyss of the "Nameless" and take hold directly of the spirit as it is engaged in the business of creating the world. Here is no logic, no philosophizing; here is no twisting of facts to suit our artificial measures; here is no murdering of human nature in order to submit it to intellectual dissections; the one spirit stands face to face with the other spirit like two mirrors facing each other, and there is nothing to intervene between their mutual reflections.¹⁸

In my opinion, that man is spirit and that spirit is life and truth—or, in the nineteenth-century manner, progress and essence—is the key to Suzuki's Zen in all its ramifications, and as such, while it bears traces of the quest for quintessential truth as formulated by his mentors, Soyen Shaku and Paul Carus, it has been divested of its rationalistic and formalistic trappings. Not reason, truth, and progress, as Soyen and Carus supposed, but rather *first* the satisfaction of man's spiritual longings, and truth and progress would come in its train. Thus from apology to Zen, and thus was Suzuki enabled to survive the passing of the era which fostered him, without ever abandoning its high goals.

IV

Although I had originally intended to discuss also the period of Suzuki's editorship of the *Eastern Buddhist* since it is in these articles and editorials that one finds his most deeply held personal convictions about what he thought he was doing as an exponent of Buddhist thought and practice, it is impossible to do so. Still, at the risk of belaboring a point but precisely because Suzuki's name is popularly and critically so closely associated with Zen—and most especially with the flat-footed Zen of "go and wash your bowls"—I do offer one typical editorial comment to emphasize once again the broader scope of his interests and his lifelong commitment to uncovering essential religion:

It is to be most distinctly understood that this is not a sectarian magazine, not an organ of any special sect of Buddhism, whose characteristic teachings are to be promulgated here. . . . The object of this

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

magazine as was plainly announced in the first number is solely to expound the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism and disseminate its knowledge among non-Buddhist peoples. It has a far larger scope than being a sectarian organ. Our standpoint is that the Mahayana ought to be considered one whole, individual thing and no sects, especially no sectarian prejudices, to be recognized in it, except as so many phases or aspects of one fundamental truth. In this respect Buddhism and Christianity and all other religious beliefs are not more than variations of one single original Faith, deeply imbedded in the human soul. Why then should we confine ourselves into a narrow channel and survey the world from there.¹⁹

One sort of answer to the question raised in the quoted passage which introduces this study has been offered by the distinguished American historian Lynn T. White. Writing in 1956 on the subject of the "subtly pervasive influence of Zen" in the contemporary West, White stated:

With an almost unbelievable sophistication, but naturally in terms of their own tradition, the Zen thinkers faced and pondered many of the issues which are uppermost in the minds of Western linguists, psychologists, and philosophers today; and these latter, whether directly or by reflection, are finding light from the East. Prophecy is rash, but it may well be that the publication of D. T. Suzuki's first *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in 1927 will seem in future generations as great an intellectual event as William of Moerbeke's Latin translations of Aristotle in the thirteenth century or Marsiglio Ficino's of Plato in the fifteenth. But in Suzuki's case the shell of the Occident has been broken through.²⁰

As I have attempted to show, however, for Suzuki himself the publication of the *Essays* was not the beginning. Indeed, in this respect it was not so much that the shell of the Occident was broken through in 1927 by the power of

¹⁹ *Eastern Buddhist*, I (July, 1921), 156.

²⁰ *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 304-305.

Suzuki's pen, as it was that his own shell had been broken through years before with his assimilation of certain nineteenth-century ideas and ideals that seemed to him not only apologetically viable for the immediate tasks at hand, but also essentially compatible with the Buddhist vision of Reality and the living spirit of its faith. And the question may at least be raised: Who had the "almost unbelievable sophistication"? The Zen thinkers, or the man who introduced them?

In an essay written in tribute to Suzuki after his death in 1966, Alan Watts relates an anecdote intending to reveal the special quality of the man he was memorializing as "the 'mind-less' scholar":

I remember a lecture where a member of the audience asked him, "Dr. Suzuki, when you use the word 'reality,' are you referring to the relative reality of the physical world, or to the absolute reality of the transcendental world?" He closed his eyes and went into that characteristic attitude which some of his students call "doing a Suzuki," for no one could tell whether he was in deep meditation or fast asleep. After about a minute's silence, though it seemed longer, he opened his eyes and said, "Yes."²¹

As apt and incisive as this wonderful story is it rather masks the sort of man Suzuki *once was*, for its humor and detachment belie the gravity of purpose and missionary zeal with which he undertook his life's work as interpreter of Buddhism and Zen to the modern world. Suzuki did not "do" very many "Suzuki's" in the early years of his career. Although he was never merely an apologist for Buddhism nor merely a reformer of its practices, I have attempted to indicate how earnestly he pursued these tasks at the outset and how they affected the formulation of his message. He worked hard then to develop and refine his interpretations of Buddhism and Zen, always measuring them against a standard of truth he believed clear-sighted men in both the West and the East were prepared to espouse, always filtering them through what he believed on the authority of his own experience to be every man's inmost religious consciousness. In later years perhaps he was more detached—or "absolutely

²¹ "The 'Mind-less' Scholar: A Memoir," *Eastern Buddhist*, New Series, II (August, 1967), 125.

free" as a Zen-man would have it—exhibiting in his own personality the fruits of his intellectual labors and religious quest. And if so, he himself had fully become the East-West synthesis he so desired to bring about.

In terms of the scholarly investigation of Suzuki's writings, now hardly begun, all of this is to contend that if his later interpretations, specifically of Zen to the West, are understood to be inconsistent with these early writings on Buddhism, the Mahayana, Zen and religion in general, then such alterations are perhaps not to be explained by assuming his fundamental ideas and convictions changed or were abandoned. Rather, they may be more adequately explained by searching out those ideas and concerns which so altered the Western climate of opinion religiously and philosophically that Suzuki recognized a need to reformulate his interpretations. Convinced as he was of the essential truth of his message, and desirous of communicating this truth in *intelligible* ways, Suzuki was a master of *upaya*—skillful means.