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*D. T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work*

*"On peut se sentir fier d'être contemporain d'un certain nombre d'hommes de ce temps..."*

Albert Camus.

We are living in a very unusual age. It is therefore no great wonder that there have been unusual men in it. Though perhaps less universally known than such figures as Einstein and Gandhi (who became symbols of our time) Daisetz Suzuki was no less remarkable a man than these. And though his work may not have had such resounding and public effect, he contributed no little to the spiritual and intellectual revolution of our time. The impact of Zen on the west, striking with its fullest force right after World War II, in the midst of the existentialist upheaval, at the beginning of the atomic and cybernetic age, with western religion and philosophy in a state of crisis and with the consciousness of man threatened by the deepest alienation, the work and personal influence of Dr. Suzuki proved to be both timely and fruitful: much more fruitful than we have perhaps begun to realize. I do not speak now of the rather superficial western enthusiasm for the externals and the froth of Zen (which Dr. Suzuki himself could tolerantly but objectively evaluate) but of the active leaven of Zen insight which he brought into the already bubbling ferment of western thinking in his contacts with psychoanalysis, philosophy, and religious thought like that of Paul Tillich.

There is no question that Dr. Suzuki brought to this age of dialogue a very special gift of his own: a capacity to apprehend and to occupy the precise standpoints where communication could hope to be effective. He was able to do this all the more effectively because

one felt he was entirely free from the dictates of partisan thought-patterns and academic ritualism. He was not compelled to play the complex games by which one jockeys for advantage in the intellectual world. Therefore, of course, he found himself quite naturally and without difficulty in a position of prominence. He spoke with authority, the authority of a simple, clear-sighted man who was aware of human limits and not inclined to improve on them with huge artificial structures that had no real significance. He did not need to put another head on top of his own, as the Zen saying goes. This of course is an advantage in any dialogue, for when men try to communicate with each other, it is good for them to speak with distinct and personal voices, not to blur their identities by speaking through several official masks at the same time.

It was my good fortune to meet Dr. Suzuki and to have a couple of all too short conversations with him. The experience was not only rewarding, but I would say it was unforgettable. It was, in my own life, a quite extraordinary event since, because of the circumstances in which I live, I do not get to meet all those I would meet professionally if I were, say, teaching in a university. I had known his work for a long time, had corresponded with him, and we had had a short dialogue published, in which we discussed the "Wisdom of Emptiness" as found comparatively, in Zen and in the Egyptian Desert Fathers. ("Wisdom in Emptiness"—A dialogue between Daisetz Suzuki and Thomas Merton, in *New Directions 17*, New York, 1961.) On his last trip to the United States I had the great privilege and pleasure of meeting him. One had to meet this man in order to fully appreciate him. He seemed to me to embody all the indefinable qualities of the "Superior Man" of the ancient Asian, Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist, traditions. Or rather in meeting him one seemed to meet that "True Man of No Title" that Chuang Tzu and the Zen Masters speak of. And of course this is the man one really wants to meet. Who else is there? In meeting Dr. Suzuki and drinking a cup of tea with him I felt I had met this one man. It was like finally arriving at one's own home. A very happy experience, to say the least. There is not a great deal one has to say about it, because

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to speak at length would divert attention to details that are after all irrelevant. When one is actually there with a person, the multiple details fall naturally into the unity that is seen without being expressed. When one speaks of it second hand there are only the multiple details. The True Man has meanwhile long since gone about his business somewhere else.

Thus far I have spoken simply as a human being. I should also speak as a Catholic priest and monk, brought up in a certain western religious tradition but with, I hope, a legitimate curiosity about and openness to other traditions. Such a one can only with diffidence hazard statements about Buddhism, since he cannot be sure that he has a trustworthy insight into the spiritual values of a tradition with which he is not really familiar. Speaking for myself, I can venture to say that in Dr. Suzuki, Buddhism finally became for me completely comprehensible, whereas before it had been a very mysterious and confusing jumble of words, images, doctrines, legends, rituals, buildings, and so forth. It seemed to me that the great and baffling cultural luxuriance which has clothed the various forms of Buddhism in different parts of Asia is the beautiful garment thrown over something quite simple. The greatest religions are all, in fact, very simple. They all retain very important essential differences, no doubt, but in their inner reality Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism are extremely simple (though capable as I say of baffling luxuriance) and they all end up with the simplest and most baffling thing of all: direct confrontation with Absolute Being, Absolute Love, Absolute Mercy or Absolute Void, by an immediate and fully awakened engagement in the living of everyday life. In Christianity the confrontation is theological and affective, through word and love. In Zen it is metaphysical and intellectual through insight and emptiness. Yet Christianity too has its tradition of apophatic contemplation or knowledge in "unknowing" while the last words I remember Dr. Suzuki saying (before the usual good-byes) was "The most important thing is Love!" I must say that as a Christian I was profoundly moved. Truly *Prajna* and *Karuna* are one (as the Buddhist says) or *Caritas* (love) is indeed the highest knowledge.

I saw Dr. Suzuki only in two brief visits and I did not feel I ought to waste time exploring abstract, doctrinal explanations of his tradition. But I did feel that I was speaking to someone who, in a tradition completely different from my own, had matured, had become complete and had found his way. One cannot understand Buddhism until one meets it in this existential manner, in a person in whom it is alive. Then there is no longer a problem of understanding doctrines which cannot help being a bit exotic for a westerner, but only a question of appreciating a value which is self-evident. I am sure that no alert and intelligent westerner ever met Dr. Suzuki without feeling something of the same.

This same existential quality is evident in another way in Dr. Suzuki's vast published work. An energetic, original and productive worker, granted the gift of a long life and tireless enthusiasm for his subject, he has left us a whole library of Zen in English. I am unfortunately not familiar with his work in Japanese or able to say what it amounts to. But what we have in English is certainly without question the most complete and most authentic presentation of an Asian tradition and experience by any one man in terms accessible to the west. The uniqueness of Dr. Suzuki's work lies in the directness with which an Asian thinker has been able to communicate his own experience of a profound and ancient tradition in a western language. This is quite a different proposition from the more or less trustworthy translations of eastern texts by western scholars with no experience of Asian spiritual values, or even the experience of Asian traditions acquired by westerners.

One reason for the peculiar effectiveness of Dr. Suzuki's communication of Zen to the west is that he had a rather remarkable capacity to transpose Zen into the authentic totalities of western mystical traditions that were most akin to it. I do not know how deep an acquaintance Dr. Suzuki had with the western mystics, but he had read Meister Eckhart pretty thoroughly. (I may mention in parentheses that I agree with Dr. Suzuki in his final position about Zen and Mysticism, in which he elected to say that Zen was "not mysticism" in order to avoid certain disastrous ambiguities. But this

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question still calls for further study.)

Although Dr. Suzuki accepted the current rather superficial western idea of Eckhart as a unique and completely heretical phenomenon, we must admit, with more recent scholarship, that Eckhart does represent a profound, wide and largely orthodox current in western religious thought: that which goes back to Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and comes down in the west through Scotus Erigena and the medieval school of St. Victor, but also profoundly affected Eckhart's Master, St. Thomas Aquinas. Having come in touch with this relatively little known tradition Suzuki found it congenial and was able to make good use of it. I found for example that in my dialogue with him mentioned above, he was able to use the mythical language in which the Fall of Man is described, in the Bible and the Church Fathers, to distinct advantage psychologically and spiritually. He spoke quite naturally and easily of the implications of the "Fall" in terms of man's alienation from himself, and he did so in just the same simple natural way as the Fathers of the Church like St. Augustine or St. Gregory of Nyssa did. If the truth be told, there is a great deal in common in the psychological and spiritual insight of the Church Fathers and in the psychoanalytically oriented Christian existential thinking of men like Tillich, himself more influenced than many realized by the Augustinian tradition. Dr. Suzuki was perfectly at home in this atmosphere and perfectly able to handle these traditional symbols. In fact he was far more at home with them than many western theologians. He understood and appreciated the symbolic language of the Bible and the Fathers much more directly than many of our contemporaries, Catholics included, for whom all this is little more than an embarrassment. The whole reality of the "Fall" is inscribed in our nature in what Jung called symbolic archetypes, and the Fathers of the Church (as well as the Biblical writers too no doubt) were much more concerned with this archetypal significance than with the Fall as an "historical event." Others besides Dr. Suzuki have, without being Christians, intuitively grasped the importance of this symbol. Two names spring to mind: Erich Fromm, the psychoanalyst, and that

remarkable and too little known poet, Edwin Muir, the translator into English of Franz Kafka. I do not think Dr. Suzuki was the kind of person to be bothered with any concern about whether or not he was sufficiently "modern." The True Man of No Title is not concerned about such labels, since he knows no time but the present, and knows he cannot apprehend either the past or the future except in the present.

It may be said that all Dr. Suzuki's books are pretty much about the same thing. Occasionally he will draw back and view Zen from the standpoint of culture, or psychoanalysis, or from the viewpoint of Christian Mysticism (in Eckhart) but even then he does not really move out of Zen into some other field, or even take a radically new look at his subject. He says very much the same things, tells the same wonderful Zen stories perhaps in slightly different words, and ends with the same conclusion: Zero equals infinity. Yet there is no monotony in his works and one does not feel he is repeating himself, because in fact each book is brand new. Each book is a whole new experience. Those of us who have written a great deal can well admire this quality in Dr. Suzuki's work: its remarkable consistency, its unity. Pseudo-Dionysius says that the wisdom of the contemplative moves in a *motus orbicularis*—a circling and hovering motion like that of the eagle above some invisible quarry, or the turning of a planet around an invisible sun. The work of Dr. Suzuki bears witness of the silent orbiting of *prajna* which is (in the language of the same western tradition of the Areopagite and Erigena), a "circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere." The rest of us travel in linear flight. We go far, take up distant positions, abandon them, fight battles and then wonder what we got so excited about, construct systems and then junk them, and wander all over continents looking for something new. Dr. Suzuki stayed right where he was, in his own Zen, and found it inexhaustibly new with each new book. Surely this is an indication of a special gift, a special quality of spiritual genius.

In any event, his work remains with us as a great gift, as one of the unique spiritual and intellectual achievements of our time. It is

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above all precious to us in the way it has moved East and West closer together bringing Japan and America into agreement on a deep level, when everything seems to conspire to breed conflict, division, incomprehension, confusion and war. Our time has not always excelled in the works of peace. We can be proud of a contemporary who has devoted his life to those works, and done so with such success.