

SIR HERBERT READ

*Suzuki: Zen and Art*<sup>1</sup>

Zen Buddhism of all religions is the one that most specifically educates the aesthetic impulses, and for that reason alone it is a religion that engages the interest of artists everywhere, even in the Western world. Most Westerners owe their understanding of the Zen spirit in art to Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, and it is he who more than anyone else has succeeded in explaining why Zen Buddhism, as a religious or spiritual philosophy, should seem so relevant to the Western artist. Few Western philosophers of art can claim any intimate acquaintance with the religion itself as a spiritual discipline. I myself find in Zen an intensification of certain insights into the nature of art and of the creative activity which indeed are not unknown in the history of Western art, but which in the West have never been part of a general philosophy of life, that have never formed part of a coherent tradition. Plato, Boehme, Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, Novalis, Wordsworth, Blake, Hopkins, Simone Weil—all these and others have expressed sentiments that are strictly in accordance with Zen doctrine, but they have spoken as artists and as individuals, and have never been conscious of making a contribution to a common tradition.

All authorities would agree that Zen is first and foremost a *discipline* rather than a *doctrine*, or at least, that the fundamental insights characteristic of a master of Zen come only as a result of discipline. Other religions—perhaps all religions have their disciplines, their long periods of initiation or spiritual training; but the

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<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of the Introduction to *Zen, Rocks, and Waters*, by Frederic Spiegelberg. Copyright 1961 by Pantheon Books. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

Zen discipline is characterized by certain practices which immediately bring it into relation with the disciplines of art. Indeed, one might say, (as Dr. Suzuki has said) the reason why so many Zen masters have been artists is because their spiritual disciplines inevitably stir up their artistic instincts.<sup>1</sup> They become artists willy-nilly, and this is because the kind of enlightenment they seek can be attained only by seeing the world as a series of concrete particulars—by the physical prehension, as Whitehead would say, of actual entities. This prehension of reality in its isness is surely what the artist Cézanne meant by “the concrete study of nature,” giving “concrete shape to sensations and perceptions,” and his achievement was the result of an optical discipline, a training of the eye to avoid mental or intellectual abstractions in order that his sensations in front of nature could be “realized” in all their isness or concreteness. Dr. Suzuki has said that “the artist’s world is one of free creation,” which is a dangerous generalization; but he immediately adds “this can come only from intuitions directly and immediately rising from the isness of things, unhampered by senses and intellect.”<sup>2</sup> The artist “creates forms and sounds out of formlessness and soundlessness,” and to this extent, says Dr. Suzuki, the artist’s world coincides with that of Zen.

But how can the artist create forms and sounds “unhampered by senses and intellect?” Concreteness is indeed a quality “purged of all intellectual sediments...free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description,” but the artist, as distinct from the Zen-man, must prehend concreteness with his senses. Zen has no need of “things external,” but art is a process of externalization, or reification. If the Zen master on the one hand is satisfied “to delineate...on the infinite canvas of time and space the way the flying wild geese cast their shadow on the water below without any idea of doing so, while the water reflects the geese just as naturally and unintentionally,” the artist on the other hand (leaving aside

<sup>1</sup> *Zen and Japanese Culture*, by Daisetz T. Suzuki (New York: Bollingen Series, 1959), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

## SUZUKI: ZEN AND ART

certain Crocean sophistications) must give material expression to his intuitions, and this can only be done through the channels of the senses.

Nevertheless, there is a certain way of looking at this problem which eliminates the normal physiological process of sensation. The modern psychology of art has developed the concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*), and more and more depends on it for an explanation of aesthetic values. There are several definitions of empathy, varying in subtlety and complexity, but essential to them all is an identification of form and spirit. The spirit submits to the form (when we apprehend the work of art in its concreteness) and the form submits to the spirit (when the artist moulds the form till it receives with exactitude the impress of the spirit). Several Zen anecdotes illustrate this dialectical process—for example, the best-known one which suggests that the artist should draw a bamboo for ten years, become a bamboo, and then forget about bamboos when he is drawing a bamboo. In Zen philosophy this is called “the rhythmic movement of the spirit,” and what is implied is that the spirit unconsciously identifies itself with the organic growth and form of the bamboo. The artist then draws the bamboo with organic necessity, that is to say, naturally, with “everyday mind.”

But what do we mean by “spirit” in this connection? It is a word that can be used freely and loosely by philosophers of religion, but those who deal in the actual entities of art might shrink from the vagueness of the term. Aesthetics is the dialectics of form and feeling, and feeling is by no means identical with spirit, though spirit may perhaps be identified with emotion. The distinction between feeling and emotion has perhaps never been clearly formulated and indeed no definite line of demarcation exists; but the tendency has been to regard feeling as a basic psychological function, a process which takes place between the ego and a given content and imparts to the content a definite *value* in the sense of acceptance or rejection (which is Jung’s definition), whereas emotion is an activity of the psyche as a whole, “a total pattern of the soul, characterized by a perceptible bodily innervation on the one hand and a peculiar disturbance of the idea-

tional process on the other."<sup>1</sup> It has been said that "we possess our feelings but we are possessed by our emotions."<sup>2</sup> To the primitive mind, as Jung points out, "a man who is seized by strong emotion is possessed by a devil or a spirit." Emotion in this sense becomes autonomous, breaks away from the hierarchy of consciousness. "No wonder, therefore, that the primitive mind sees in this the activity of a strange invisible being, a spirit. Spirit in this case is the reflection of an autonomous affect, which is why the ancients, very appropriately, called spirits *imagines* — 'images.'"<sup>3</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that the Zen concept of art is much more nearly related to emotion than to feeling, and when Jung further asserts that emotion is grounded in certain formal patterns (to which he gives the name *archetypes*), which are archaic, collective, universal and so emotionally charged that they give rise to "an alteration of consciousness which Janet called *abaissement du niveau mental*," then we do seem to have found a correspondence with the state of heightened consciousness which the Japanese Zen initiates call *satori*. Jung, in his *Interpretation of Nature and the Psyche* (the very title of which suggests Zen), points to the relation between this *abaissement du niveau mental* and parapsychological events. Emotion can then be defined as a state of relative unconsciousness in which an almost magical change in the subject-object relation takes place. An "instinctual pattern" of images emerges. The images have no basis in immediate perception. There seems to exist in the unconscious an *a priori*, causally inexplicable knowledge of a situation which at the time is not knowable by normal modes of perception. From this inexplicable background of knowledge emerge images which correspond to but are not caused by immediate events (that is to say, by an objective situation). Jung has his own explanation of this strange phenomenon, which he calls synchronicity, and he does not fail to

<sup>1</sup> *Psychological Types* (London, 1938), p. 543.

<sup>2</sup> By E. Harms in *Feelings and Emotions — The Mooseheart Symposium* (New York, 1950). Quoted by James Hillmann, *Emotion — a Comprehensive Phenomenology of Theories and their Meanings for Therapy* (London, 1960), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*. Collected Works, 8, (New York and London, 1960), p. 330.

point out the striking manner in which his hypothesis is anticipated in Chinese philosophy, particularly in Taoism of which Zen was an offspring. The general characteristic of this philosophy is *a thinking in terms of the whole*, and as Dr. Spiegelberg points out in his Introduction, this leads to an all-embracing concept which gives "meaning" (Wilhelm's translation of the word *Tao*) to all things in their concreteness, and overcomes the "schizophrenia" of those religions that would separate God and Nature. This holistic philosophy with its various techniques of "grasping the total situation" would seem to take the existence of synchronicity for granted, and Dr. Jung points out that unlike the Greek-trained Western mind, "the Chinese mind does not aim at grasping details for their own sake, but at a view which sees the detail as part of the whole. For obvious reasons, a cognitive operation of this kind is impossible to the unaided intellect. Judgment must therefore rely much more on the irrational functions of consciousness, that is on sensation (the 'sens du réel') and intuition (perception by means of subliminal contents)."<sup>1</sup>

Zen art reflects this paradox of "One in All and All in One," and therefore seeks to represent those archetypal patterns that transcend the categories of inner and outer and attempt to relate subjective feelings to total emotional situations in which the individual "one," while maintaining its concrete and sensuous entity, becomes, as it were, a fixed star that cannot be detached from the image of the whole constellation. If we can maintain this distinction between emotion and feeling (with which, if we were to pursue the argument to its end, we could correlate the distinction between acausal and causal connecting principles), then the specific difference between Zen art and almost all forms of Western art becomes obvious. A cautious "almost" is inserted because there may be certain phases of Western romanticism which have been aware of the distinction and have attempted to comprehend the idea of One in All and All in One—Schelling had the idea, and Coleridge and Wordsworth at-

<sup>1</sup> *The Interpretation of Nature and the Psyche* (London, 1955), p. 49.

tempted the concrete realization of it in their poetry. Coleridge in particular was aware of the idea (which he took from Heraclitus and Spinoza as well as from Schelling) and a reconciliation of "God as the ultimate subject" and "the World as the ultimate object," in some kind of organically constructed whole, was his constant aim.<sup>1</sup> Only the fear of falling into that "grossest of errors," pantheism, kept him from developing a philosophy much nearer to Taoism than to Christianity. It was probably his private opinion, as it was Blake's public accusation, that Wordsworth had fallen into this error.

I will not, on this occasion, say anything about the relation of Zen art to those types of contemporary art which sometimes claim to have been inspired by Zen philosophy. I have every sympathy for those poets and painters who are attracted to Zen as a philosophy, but I feel sure that in general they have not begun to understand its meaning (*the Meaning*) nor to practice its discipline. Abstraction in particular (which I am the last person to despise as a style of art almost imposed on us by the spiritual emptiness of a technological civilization) seems to contradict the principle of "One in All and All in One." It seeks what Mondrian called "a culture of pure relationships," that is to say "pure plastics unconditioned by subjective feeling and conception." There is a closer connection between Zen and that movement in modern art now known as Action Painting. My friend Georges Duthuit, as long ago as 1936, made the necessary correlations.<sup>2</sup> His descriptions of the methods of some of the Zen masters might almost have inspired those Western artists who have since that time developed a style called "action painting":

"About the year 1215, a Zen priest . . . called Mū Ch'i, came to Hangchow, where he rebuilt a ruined monastery. By rapid swirls of ink he attempted, with undeniable success, to capture the moments of exaltation and set down the fleeting visions which he obtained from the frenzy of wine, the stupor of tea, or the vacancy of inanimation. Chen Jung, about the same time, was noted for the simplicity of his

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kathleen Coburn, *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1949), p. 407.

<sup>2</sup> *Chinese Mysticism and Modern Painting* (Paris and London, 1936), *passim*.

life and the competence with which he fulfilled his duties as a magistrate. The vigor of his prose, of his poems and of the dragons whose rings he forged out of the foam of the torrents on an anvil of granite, was also praised. Finally, he was admired for his habits of a confirmed drunkard. 'He made clouds by splashing ink on his pictures. For mists he spat out water. When wrought up by wine he uttered a great shout and, seizing his hat, used it as a brush, roughly smearing his drawing; after which he finished his work with a proper brush.' One of the first painters of the sect, Wang Hsia, who lived in the early ninth century, would perform when he was drunk real *tours de force* going so far as to plunge his head into a bucket of ink and then flop it over a piece of silk on which there appeared, as if by magic, lakes, trees, enchanted mountains. But none seems to have carried emancipation further, among these priests, than Ying Yü-chen, secretary of the famous temple Ching-tzū ssū who would take a cat-like pleasure in spattering and lacerating the sheet."<sup>1</sup>

After which the methods of a modern action-painter might seem relatively tame. But the Zen masters, for all their inebriated antics, were first and foremost trained craftsmen. As Mr. Duthuit points out, "since imagination has been enthroned as sovereign, it must possess, in order to reign, some tested and dependable instruments slowly perfected by generations. It requires that the painter should place at its service a supple wrist, a steady and perfectly practiced hand." This "hand" was obtained by long and devoted practice of calligraphy. Zen art, as indeed all Oriental art, cannot be understood as other than an extension of this basic craft. The whole purpose of the Zen discipline in painting was to make the brush a spontaneous and unobserved index of emotion, a reflex as instantaneous as the winking of an eye or an outbreak of laughter. The "means" have been made as invisible as the impulse that runs along a nerve.

The modern Western painter may understand the methods and purpose of the Zen discipline, but he is rarely able to achieve the necessary state of grace, either because he cannot escape from the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

modes of intellection or conceptual analysis which are second nature to Western man, or simply because he does not undergo (on account of the practical difficulties) the necessary basic training in calligraphy. These requirements are interrelated, for without the physical release given by perfected skill in rhythmic expression, the artist is unlikely to attain spiritual release, that state of intuitive awareness or transcendental wisdom called *prajña*.

In Dr. Suzuki's words: "Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. 'Childlikeness' has to be restored after long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When this is attained, man thinks yet he does not think. He thinks like the showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage."<sup>1</sup>

If we believe, as I do, that Western man, in order to survive the spiritually destructive forces of rational technology, must recover that condition of 'childlikeness' described by Dr. Suzuki, then abstract painting (more particularly 'action painting') may well be one of the ways. But the Western artist is only at the beginning of what must in the nature of things be a long process of reorientation and reconditioning. Conversion is not enough. The spiritual and practical exercises demanded exceed the narrow limits of one man's lifetime.

It follows from all I have said, and all that masters of the subject such as Dr. Suzuki have said, that illumination cannot be obtained from books. It lies much deeper than mere intellection. All that a writer can do is to arouse the desire for illumination. But this desire, as Dr. Suzuki has said, does not lead anywhere outside, but within the seeker or desirer himself. "The seeking and the seeker, the desire and the desirer, are identical. Thus naturally, there cannot be any intellectual guiding post. When the way and the wayfarer are one, what can the outsider do for him? An intellectual or logical pointer

<sup>1</sup> Foreword to *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel (London, 1953), p. 7.



## SUZUKI: ZEN AND ART

can never be more than a pointer or onlooker. Personal experience and *prajñā*-intuition are the same thing.”<sup>1</sup>

*[The following reminiscence by Sir Herbert Read originally appeared in the special memorial issue of the F. A. S. magazine (Nos. 59, 60, 1966) in the Japanese translation. Ed.]*

Dr. Daisetz Suzuki became a legendary figure in Europe, the typical wise man of the East, remote, serene, far removed from our materialistic civilization and material philosophy. But we knew that he had not scorned our way of life and had for some years lived in that most materialistic country, the United States of America. Nevertheless it was with feelings of awe that I first met him in Switzerland in 1953. We were both speakers at the Annual Eranos Tagung at Ascona, and shared the hospitality of the lady who had brought that famous symposium into being, Frau Olga Frobe-Kapteyn. In this manner I became a friend of Dr. Suzuki and in the subsequent years met him on several occasions.

The last occasion was only eight months before his death. In November, 1965, I visited Japan at the invitation of Suzuki's friend and patron, Mr. Sazo Idemitsu, and had the great privilege of meeting Dr. Suzuki intimately. The most memorable of these encounters was a visit to his own home, which he showed to me with simple pride. We sat for three or four hours in conversation. He told me about his “work in progress,” and what he still intended to do “if he lived long enough.” I had with me one of my sons, a young man of twenty-three, and I was particularly struck with the kindness Dr. Suzuki displayed to this young man, treating him as someone worthy of his attention, worthy of enlightenment.

I can not call myself a disciple of Dr. Suzuki, but I have read many of his works and like all Western people I am deeply indebted to him for an understanding of Zen, particularly in relation to the fine arts. Indeed, I might be more precise: it is through an understanding of the Zen philosophy of art that I have attained some real

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<sup>1</sup> *Zen and Japanese Culture*, p. 157.

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

appreciation of Oriental art, and of the creative process in all the arts. Dr. Suzuki has said that "the artist's world is one of free creation and this can come only from intuitions directly and immediately rising from the 'isness' of things, unhampered by senses and intellect." The artist "creates sounds and forms out of formlessness and soundlessness." This means, in Western phraseology, that the artist is one who can give visible and material expression to his intuitions, and he does this, not by crude imitation of outward appearances, but by self-identification with the forms of nature and with the rhythmic movement that gives them vital significance.

Dr. Suzuki also said that before anyone can achieve greatness "childlikeness" has to be restored by means of long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. He himself had achieved the "childlikeness"; my enduring impression of him is of someone who combined the innocence of a child and the holiness of a saint.