

HIROSHI SAKAMOTO

A Unique Interpreter of Zen

Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki was widely known as a profound thinker. His critical keenness, esthetic sensibility and literary refinement were remarkable; above all he was a man of great spirituality. We should remember, however, all this genius and accomplishment was most effectively displayed in his life-long activities as an interpreter of Zen. The wisdom which had been kept alive in the soil of the Far East was made approachable to the modern mind by him in a fresh and most illuminating way.

Being rooted in the same spiritual ground of Zen, Kitaro Nishida, a close and lifelong friend, developed an exceedingly original system of philosophy. Nishida acknowledged that the development of his philosophical thinking owed much to Dr. Suzuki's personality as well as to his suggestions.¹ Dr. Suzuki himself, however, chose to be and was contented to remain an interpreter of Zen, an interpreter especially to the West. This role was most meaningful to him.

I. His Use of the Term "Zen"

First of all, Dr. Suzuki's use of the term "Zen" arrests our attention. Previous to Dr. Suzuki's writings, "Zen" had been used more or less to mean the Zen school of Buddhism. Dr. Suzuki, however, thought it necessary to draw a distinction between "Zen" as he conceived it to be and the Zen school. In one of his earlier articles, he emphatically wrote:

¹ See Preface by Kitaro Nishida to D. T. Suzuki's 文化と宗教 "Culture and Religion" (Tokyo, 1947).

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Zen is that final psychic fact that takes place when religious consciousness is heightened to extremity. Whether it comes to pass in Buddhists, in Christians, or in philosophers, is in the last analysis incidental to Zen. Unquestionably in the Far East Zen has been vitally experienced, valued, propagated and transmitted by Buddhists, especially by Mahayanists. This fact, however, does not mean that Zen belongs to Buddhism and Buddhism alone. It cannot be denied that Buddhist teachings and thoughts have historically been the powerful incentive to awaken its adherents to the experience of Zen. Nevertheless, the incentive must not be confused with the fact of experience. In short, no causal relationship can be established between Buddhist thought of any form and the actual fact of *satori*.¹

Dr. Suzuki went so far as to say:

If its temples were to be destroyed, its priestly order abolished, and its cardinal sutras and documents taken away, the Zen sect of Buddhism would inevitably die out. Even then, the Zen which I mean would continue to live. By this statement, the difference between Zen and the Zen sect, I believe, is made clearer.²

These words may sound bold, even too strong to some readers. But Dr. Suzuki's idea is clear. Virtually identifying Zen with *satori* (S. *prajñā*; enlightenment), he claimed that Zen is in reality the spirit of all religions and philosophies, and by no means belongs exclusively to Buddhism. This claim naturally resulted from the reflection upon his own experience and the close study of documents of mysticism East and West.

At the same time, Dr. Suzuki's emphasis on Zen's independence from any form of thought is notable. With this emphatic assertion he rejected the plausible view that the content of *satori* is determined by some traditional form of Buddhist philosophy, in other words, the view that *satori* is the reproduction of some traditional Buddhist philosophy into a form of personal experience. This does not mean that he disparaged the rôle thought plays in the quest for Zen. He

¹ 禅の諸問題 "The Problems of Zen" (Tokyo, 1941), pp. 7-8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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only guarded the independence and freedom of *satori* from the determination of intellection.

However, Dr. Suzuki highly valued the monastic system of moral discipline which developed in the Zen Buddhist tradition. He viewed *satori* as more closely related with such moral discipline than with thought. To him the element of discipline was essential for the Zen quest. This was unquestionably the reason why he defined Zen as "the system of moral discipline built upon the foundation of *satori*,"¹ or "the art of seeing into the nature of one's own being,"² when he intended to be more particular and definite.

In short, Dr. Suzuki used the term "Zen" to mean, in some cases, the experience or the life of *satori*, and in the other, more specifically, the moral discipline based upon the foundation of *satori*.

II. *Satori as Psychic Experience*

Two aspects can be distinguished in Dr. Suzuki's interpretation of *satori*; the one is psychological and the other philosophical. Although it is difficult to divide his works into such distinct groups, the interest in psychology is relatively higher in his earlier works, while philosophical interest becomes dominant in his later ones. I would like to briefly touch upon these two aspects of his works here.

Let us go into Dr. Suzuki's descriptions and discussions of *satori*. It is, in a word, preëminently an awakening experience which, coming instantaneously, has crucial importance upon the life of a seeker. Dr. Suzuki enumerated its chief characteristics as follows: 1. Irrationality; 2. Intuitive insight; 3. Authoritativeness; 4. Affirmation; 5. Sense of the beyond; 6. Impersonal tone; 7. Feeling of exaltation; 8. Momentariness.³ For definite meanings of these characteristics, the reader should go directly to Dr. Suzuki's works, especially to the 1st and 2nd Series of his *Essays*, in which detailed accounts are given of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

² *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 1st Series (London, 1927), p. 1.

³ *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 2nd Series (London, 1933), p. 16ff.

satori, together with numerous examples from the Zen masters. I limit myself here to comment on the second characteristic, "intuitive insight."

The term "intuitive" needs some qualification in applying it to *satori*; it is valid to *satori*, in so far as the immediacy and instantaneousness is concerned; but it is invalid for its presupposing some object to be intuited, because Zen has no such object. The intuitive or noetic nature of *satori* may be said to bear some resemblance with the experience of awaking from a dream. In dreaming, we are under the spell of dream-apperception and dream-thinking, so to speak, and yet we are quite unaware of this fact. Awaking and coming to our senses, we realize that we have been under the spell of dream-apperception and dream-thinking.

In the case of *satori*, what stands for dream-apperception and dream-thinking is reason (S. *vijñāna*), or more specifically, discrimination (S. *vikalpa*). Discrimination is the function of distinguishing something from the other; it is always at work in every experience of ours, perceptive, intellectual and emotional. We never discriminate without attaching ourselves to the result of the discrimination at all. Discrimination results in attachment, and attachment results in sufferings. Discrimination thus dominates over our consciousness. Nevertheless, we remain fundamentally ignorant or unaware of this fact, even though we sometimes feel some vague uneasiness about ourselves. It is as if we were dreaming a fearful dream and had no awareness of the fact.

Satori is precisely the awakening from the state of being dominated by discrimination without any awareness of this fact. In this awakening experience the function of discrimination is broken through and emptied. From Tê-shan's¹ following words one may get an inkling of what the breaking through of discrimination is like :

However deep your knowledge of abtruse philosophy, it is like a piece of hair placed in the vastness of space; and however important your ex-

¹ 德山. J. Tokusan (782-865). A Chinese master renowned for severity in treating his disciples and visitors.

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perience in things worldly, it is like a bead of water dropped in an unfathomable abyss.¹

The breaking through of discrimination, however, does not mean the destruction of its structure. The function of discrimination now revives as discrimination of non-discrimination.² This point will be discussed later, especially in connection with the problem of "absolute affirmation."

One may imagine that there is an affinity between *satori* and mystical experience in which mystics claim to have come into union with modeless God. But *satori* has nothing to do with any mystical state which is removed from the ordinary state of mind. Nor has Zen any object with which it intends to come into union; it has neither God, Godhead, nor Universe, nor even emptiness (*S. sanyata*), as object.

Let us turn to the problem of the psychic process prior to *satori*. Zen seekers as a rule had considerable grounding in Buddhist philosophy before the start of their Zen quest. They felt doubt and anxiety about the intellectual understanding of themselves and ultimate destiny. This doubt and anxiety motivated them to their new quest. They endeavored to attain the final, firm ground of reality in all seriousness, with all their power. Dr. Suzuki emphasized the importance of this seeking spirit:

This intense seeking is the driving force of Zen consciousness. "Ask and it shall be given unto you; knock and it shall be open unto you." This is also the practical instruction leading up to the Zen experience. But this asking or seeking is altogether subjective and the biographical records of Zen do not give much information in this regard; especially in the earlier periods of Zen history, its importance is to be inferred from various circumstances connected with the experience.³

Broadly speaking, their way of approach was thoroughly to

¹ *Essays*, I, p. 232.

² See D. T. Suzuki, *The Essence of Buddhism* (Kyoto, 1948), Lecture One.

³ *Essays*, II, p. 39.

negate; Zen seekers sought to negate, and thus to go deeper than, anything objectified, conceived and thought—in a word, anything discriminated. This quest meant a painful struggle for them, because no measure was known to them concerning how to proceed. They had to go on with the “knocking” as intensely as they could.

However, a tension is created between the discriminative frame of mind and the denial of it in the process of their inquiry; the stronger the seeking spirit, the greater becomes the tension. This heightening tension distinctively marks Zen consciousness. It can never be finally dissolved until the discriminative frame of mind is broken through and emptied in the experience of *satori*.

Practically, they follow the practice of *dhyāna*,¹ as was generally prevalent in the Buddhist monasteries. In the Zen inquirer's case, however, *dhyāna* was not practiced for the purpose of producing a state of quietude called *samādhi*,² as is the case with yogins. Even if *samādhi* happened to be brought about in the process of Zen quest, it was something to be negated, without dwelling upon it. Dr. Suzuki was most emphatic on the difference between Zen and *dhyāna*, *satori* and *samādhi*, whereas he admitted the due meaning of *dhyāna* for the Zen quest.³

When Zen consciousness attained maturity, Zen masters' guiding hands were especially helpful to their disciples in achieving the final flight. They carefully watched their disciples in the Zen quest and gave them timely, appropriate suggestions and other stimuli, which enabled them to ultimately awaken in *satori*. For instance, Liang-sui⁴ was training under Ma-ku.⁵ One day, seeing his disciple's Zen consciousness fully ripened, Ma-ku called out, “O Liang-sui!” upon

¹ *Dhyāna* (J. 坐禪 *zazen*) means to hold one's thought collected, or, not to let thought wander away from its legitimate path; practically, it means to have the mind concentrated on a single subject of thought.

² *Samādhi* (J. 三昧 *sammāi*) is a state of intense concentration, in which the subject becomes identified with the object. In some extended use of the term, *samādhi* appears as synonymous with *prajñā* (*satori*). Originally and properly, however, they are distinct from each other.

³ *Essays*, I, p. 67ff.

⁴ 良遂 J., Ryōsui.

⁵ 麻谷 J., Mayoku.

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which Liang-sui answered, "Yes." Thus called three times, Liang-sui replied three times, when the master cried: "O you stupid fellow!" This brought Liang-sui to his senses. It is widely known today that Zen masters gave seekers harsh treatment, such as verbal insults, giving slaps or blows, etc., in order to awaken them.

In this connection, some reference will be needed to *kōan*.¹ The *kōan* exercise was devised by experienced, thoughtful Zen masters as a most effective systematized method of stirring up Zen consciousness in the seeker's mind and heightening it to the final burst into *satori*. In the beginning of Zen history, of course, there was no *kōan*. It came into vogue during the Sung dynasty when signs of decline were discernible in the inquiring spirit into Zen. On merits and demerits of the *kōan* system, Dr. Suzuki commented as follows:

In a similar way, the introduction of the system of *kōan* into Zen, pure, natural, and elementary, is at once a deterioration and an improvement. But once brought out into existence, the system seems very hard to do away with. It was of course quite human on the part of the Zen master to be thinking of his less fortunate brothers whose natural endowments were not so rich as his own, and who, therefore, would be likely to miss opportunities to come into the truth of Zen The master knew that the device of *kōan* was an artificiality and a superfluity; for unless Zen grew out of man's own inner activity it could not be truly genuine and full of creative vitality as it ought to be. But even a semblance would be a blessing when the genuine thing is so difficult and rare to have; and, moreover, it was likely, if it is left to itself, to disappear altogether out of the lore of human experience. The semblance is not necessarily a mere makeshift but may have in it something quite true and full of possibilities; for the system of *kōan* and *zazen*, when properly made use of, really does unfold the mind to the truth of Zen.²

At the close of this section, a few words on Dr. Suzuki's use of

¹ *Kōan* 公案 was originally the term denoting "a public document." In the Zen Buddhist tradition, however, it has been used to mean the case of some ancient Zen master—be it an anecdote, a dialogue with monks, a statement or question put forward to monks, or whatever else that came to be employed for the purpose of awakening Zen seekers. For the detailed explanation, see *Essays*, II, pp. 1-165; *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto, 1934), Chap. VIII.

² *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto, 1934), pp. 112-113.

the term "the Unconscious." We sometimes come across this term in his writings, especially in his earlier works. For instance, he wrote, "When it [Zen consciousness] is fully matured, it is sure to break out as *satori*, which is an insight into the Unconscious."¹ Is his conception of the Unconscious basically the same as that of depth-psychology? It is true that he showed a special interest in depth-psychology; it is also true that there existed a mutual sympathy between Dr. Suzuki and C. G. Jung. Nevertheless, Dr. Suzuki was clear about the difference between the Jungian concept of the Unconscious and the Zen concept of the Unconscious (accurately, no-mind 無心).² While admitting the availability of that concept in some measure in interpreting Zen and sometimes utilizing it in fact, he was fully aware of its hypothetical nature and the conventionality of its application to the problem of *satori*. Dr. Suzuki himself wrote:

But as a matter of fact there is no "beyond," no "underneath," no "upon" in our consciousness. The mind is one indivisible whole and can not be torn in pieces When the *koan* breaks down all the hindrances to the ultimate truth, we all realize that there are after all no such things as "hidden recesses of mind" or even the truth of Zen appearing all the time so mysterious.³

III. Satori as Ultimate Reality Disclosed

Dr. Suzuki's psychological descriptions of Zen were made to acquaint the reader with the actual psychic facts of Zen rather than to interpret Zen psychologically. This purpose was most successfully achieved in his *Essays*.

There is unquestionably a limit to the psychological approach to Zen; it can not deal with the problem of what the fact of Zen means, the problem of the truth of Zen. It is the task of Zen thinker to make the meaning of Zen or *satori* clear in terms of thought or philosophy.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

² *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (London, 1949), pp. 60-61.

³ *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 119.

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(I do not mean that there is a profession called "Zen thinker." A Zen master or a Zen man who commits himself to the problem of the truth of Zen is deservedly a Zen thinker.) It was quite natural for Dr. Suzuki who was by nature a thinker and a man of wisdom to move his chief interest from Zen psychology to Zen thought in his later years.

A question may be raised here about the possibility of Zen thought: Is it possible at all to make the meaning of *satori* clear in terms of thought, if *satori*, as Dr. Suzuki declared, is independent of any form of philosophy?

Satori's independence and freedom from any thought is invariably true. But this does not mean that *satori* can never be expressed by any kind of thinking. As discussed before, the function of thinking is broken through and emptied in the experience of *satori*, but is by no means destroyed; it is revived as a vital, working instrument of *satori*, which Dr. Suzuki referred to as "thinking of non-thinking," "reason of non-reason," or "discrimination of non-discrimination." Definitely by this thinking of non-thinking or discrimination of non-discrimination, the meaning of *satori* is made clear in terms of thought, that is, Zen thought becomes possible.

What, then, are the characteristic marks of Zen thought as Dr. Suzuki conceived it?

First comes its outspokenness or direct expressiveness of *satori*. Straight out of the experience of *satori* and freely exercising reason of non-reason, it thinks, speaks, and expresses the truth of *satori*. Any indirect, roundabout way of communicating, such as *via negativa* or *via eminentia*, allegory or figuration, which we so often come across in literature of mysticism, is not proper to Zen thought.

The second is its universal validity as thought or philosophy. Zen thought, as long as it is thought, must be essentially and invariably intelligible to all, despite the difference of time, place and situation. By this universal validity Zen thought is to be distinguished from Zen action like winking, striking, or ejaculating, though both Zen thought and Zen action are direct expressions of *satori*-experience.

The above two Dr. Suzuki regarded as essential to Zen thought.¹ The first is especially important. For this reason, Zen thought should not be confused with merely philosophical approach to Zen.

To return to the main issue, Dr. Suzuki devotedly worked on the interpretation of historical forms of Zen thought as well as Buddhist philosophy. He preferred to do so, because he found in these forms something that beyond time and distance is illuminating to modern man in search for emancipation and therefore needs to be interpreted in a new light into the presentday world. Among his interpreting works of special importance are those on the Zen thought of such Zen masters as Hui-nêng,² Shên-hui,³ Lin-chi,⁴ Chao-chou,⁵ Bankei,⁶ Hakuin⁷ on the one hand, and Shinran⁸ and some *myōkōnins*⁹ of the Pure Land school tradition on the other. We see in them the characteristics of Zen thought clearly and most forcefully exhibited.

As for Dr. Suzuki's own thought, he did not develop it as an independent system. He rather embodied it in his interpreting works. It is truly difficult to abstract his thought from these works, but the conceptions and terms which he coined and applied in interpreting Zen thoughts as well as Buddhist philosophies, such as "the logic of *soku-hi*,"¹⁰ "discrimination of non-discrimination," "absolute affirmation,"¹¹ etc., will afford some understanding of what his own

¹ See 禅思想史研究第一卷 "Studies in the History of Zen Thought," I (Tokyo, 1943), pp. 114-115.

² 慧能 J., Enō (638-713). The sixth patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China.

³ 神會 J., Jinne (686-760). Heir to Hui-nêng, founder of the Katuru school of Zen Buddhism in China.

⁴ 臨濟 J., Rinzei (died 867). Founder of the Rinzei school of Zen Buddhism in China.

⁵ 趙州 J., Jōshū (778-897). One of the most acute Zen masters in China.

⁶ 盤珪 (1622-1693). A Japanese Zen master who is independent of any school of Zen Buddhism.

⁷ 白隱 (1685-1768). Restorer of the Rinzei school in Japan and consummator of *kōan* system of the same school.

⁸ 親鸞 (1173-1262). Founder of the Shin school of Buddhism.

⁹ 妙好人 "Wondrously excellent fellows" (like a lotus flower); a praiseful appellation for the wondrously accomplished Pure Land devotee.

¹⁰ *Soku-hi* (即非 lit., "not-therefore"). Dr. Suzuki formulated the logic of *prajñā*-intuition as "A is not A and therefore A is A," and called this the logic of *soku-hi*. See *Studies in Zen* (London, 1955), p. 119 ff.

¹¹ *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Chap. V.

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thought or philosophy is.

In the following pages, I would like to limit myself to sketching Dr. Suzuki's view of Bankei's Zen thought of the "unborn," and then Dr. Suzuki's own conception of "absolute affirmation," the former as exemplifying his interpretative treatment of historical forms of Zen thought, and the latter as being especially characteristic of his interpretation of *satori*.

IV. *Bankei's Thought of the Unborn*

The central idea of Bankei's Zen thought is that of "the unborn."¹ The term "unborn" recurrently appears in sutras and other documents of Mahayana Buddhism. It was doubtlessly a familiar, rather well-worn term for an educated Buddhist of Bankei's day.

Bankei, however, rediscovered this term to be fully expressive of the truth of *satori*. After several years' deliberation following enlightenment, he attained the conviction that he could awaken people solely by the teaching of the unborn and then started his activities of preaching and teaching. Bankei himself declared:

I preach neither Buddhism nor Zen; it suffices for all to make clear the valuable merits of Buddha-mind which everyone by nature has within himself. Therefore, I make no reference either to the Buddha's words nor to the patriarchs' sayings.²

What is the unborn, then? Let Bankei himself speak:

What every one of you has got from your parents is none other than the Buddha-mind, and this mind has never been born and is in a most decided manner full of wisdom and illumination. As it is never born, it never dies. But I do not call it the never-dying (immortal). The Buddha-mind is unborn, and by this unborn Buddha-mind all things are perfectly well managed.³

¹ J. 不生 *fushō*; S. *anuspāda*.

² 盤詰禪師語錄 "Sayings of Bankei," ed. D. T. Suzuki (Tokyo, 1941), p. 96.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33; D. T. Suzuki, *Living by Zen* (Tokyo, 1949), p. 147.

Around Bankei's thought of the unborn presented here in a shortest and most compact way, the following two points at least should be made clear here:

1. What does Bankei specifically mean by "the unborn"?
2. What is really meant by "wisdom and illumination"?

In the first place, the term "unborn" has a double meaning, the negation of "bornness" and the negation of "producing" (in the sense of producing discriminative thought).

Birth and death is certainly a perennial problem of man. Few are indifferent to death. Immortality has long been hoped for. Buddhism, however, regards birth, rather than death, as the essential problem to be attacked. According to the Buddhist view, the fear of death, as well as other kinds of fear and anxiety, originates in birth, that is, in bornness. In this way of viewing, bornness is not grasped as the sheer biological fact of birth but preponderately as discriminative-mindedness in which man is caught; "to be born in the world" is after all "to produce discrimination."

"The unborn" is the negation of this bornness. However, "the unborn" of Bankei's is by no means a mere abstract idea. Before him it has more or less been taken for such abstract idea. Bankei was the first to emphasize that the unborn is free, formless, non-discriminative, and yet illuminating, full of wisdom and absolutely self-affirming—"personal" in the deepest sense of the term. In every case of teaching others, he directly pointed to the unborn and aimed to awaken them to it, or more appropriately, to awaken the unborn in them. Dr. Suzuki described the awakening to the unborn as follows:

While our discriminative consciousness always alternates between "birth" and "death," "the unborn," welling up as the absolute itself out of the depth unplumbed by discriminative consciousness, breaks through both "birth" and "death," and thus achieves absolute affirmation, whose tremendousness may be likened to the bare blade of the sword which, having cut through the double head (of discriminative consciousness), stands alone glaring against the sky.¹

¹ "Studies in the History of Zen Thought," I, p. 21.

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Secondly, what did Bankei mean by "wisdom and illumination" of the unborn? In one of his sermons, he said:

When you were coming this way to hear my sermon, or when you are actually listening to it, suppose you hear a bell or a crow, and you at once recognize that the bell is now ringing or the crow is now cawing, and you do not make any mistake. It is the same with your seeing: you pay no special attention to see a certain thing, but when you see it, you at once know what is what. It is the Unborn in you that works these miracles, and as long as you are all like that, you cannot deny the Unborn which is the Buddha-mind bright and illuminating.¹

Like remarks can be collected freely from his "Sayings." At a glance Bankei seems to suggest by these words instinctive or unconscious responses to sense-stimuli. In point of fact, he has been too often misunderstood in this respect. His phrasing might be partly responsible for such a misunderstanding. But his intention was to awaken the auditors to the unborn at every working-out of consciousness. This is testified by his following argument: "Suppose that I have an ox or an horse brought here before me and deliver it a sermon on the unborn. Can you expect it to understand me?"² What mattered for him was the awakening or the self-affirmation of the unborn, not the return to the unconscious promptitude.

At the same time, Bankei meant that the self-affirmation of the unborn, once actualized, renewedly flashes out every moment, at every functioning-out of consciousness, and emphasized how this self-renewing operation of the unborn is really "full of wisdom and illumination." On the illuminativeness of the unborn, Dr. Suzuki passed a complementary comment:

The said illuminativeness should not be sought in some tranquilized state of consciousness nor in the transitional moment from a state of consciousness to another; the responsive functioning-out of consciousness itself is unborn and illuminating. The illuminating character of the unborn can

¹ *Living by Zen*, p. 156.

² "Sayings of Bankei," p. 65.

never be observed from without. It is the immediate self-awareness that flashes out every moment in one with the responsive functioning-out of consciousness; if conceptually separated, it cannot but be killed. That which acts is at once that which is self-aware and illuminating, and vice versa.¹

In short, Dr. Suzuki valued Bankei's thought of the unborn highly, not only for its validity and evoking power as thought, but also for its directly illuminating character as an expression of *satori*-experience. It is not an overstatement to say that Bankei's Zen was brought to the foreground for the first time by Dr. Suzuki, who heartily appreciated Bankei's devoting whole his life to teaching and awakening his fellow beings in direct a way as possible, without leaving them to grope in vain after salvation.

V. *Absolute Affirmation*

At the close, I would like to cast a glance on Dr. Suzuki's idea of "absolute affirmation" as a new expression of *satori*.

From youth, his chief concern seems to have been centered around the problem of the ultimate reality of life. At his beloved mother's death,—he afterwards reflects—rather than the sadness of bereavement, what occupied him was the conviction that he was "unborn" and never-dying with his mother, and that the ultimate reality of life was free from birth as well as from death.²

It was really at the moment when an old Zen phrase flashed before his mind that Dr. Suzuki came to the decisive Zen awakening. The phrase runs: *Hiji soto ni magarazu!* "The elbow does not bend outwards."³ Several years ago he commented on his own case of awakening as follows:

¹ "Studies in the History of Zen Thought," p. 35.

² See "In memory of Ryōga Rōshi" (*Zendō*, No. 102, 1923).

³ "Early Memories" (*Middle Way*, Nov. 1964, p. 108).

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"The elbow does not bend outwards" might seem to express a kind of necessity, but suddenly I saw that this restriction was really freedom, and I felt that the whole question of free will had been solved for me.¹

From these facts it is no wonder that Dr. Suzuki laid special stress on that aspect of Zen which is "absolute affirmation." This phrase, however, is the coinage of Dr. Suzuki himself. What did he specifically mean by this phrase?

Affirmation in the ordinary sense of the term, as well as negation, is a form of limitation. There is neither freedom nor unity in limitation; limitation murders the soul, because life of the soul is after all freedom and unity. But "absolute affirmation" differs. It emerges from the depth under the surface of limitative, that is, discriminative consciousness; it takes place without any affirming subject in the usual sense of the term. We might say that non-discriminative, subjectless subjectivity, breaking through the antithesis between assertion and negation, achieves tremendous self-affirmation. This self-affirmation of the subjectless subjectivity Dr. Suzuki called "absolute affirmation."

The first to be noted about absolute affirmation is its emergent, absolutely positive, and powerfully declarative nature. Buddhist literature, especially Zen literature, abounds in expressions of this nature, to which Dr. Suzuki paid special attention, calling it the "absolute affirmation statement" or "absolute affirmation phrase." I would like to choose a few such statements from among the translations and references in his writings.

The following is the stanza composed by Fo-kuang at the moment of *satori*:

With one stroke I have completely smashed the cave of the ghosts;
Behold, there rushes out the iron face of the monster *Nata*!
Both my ears are as deaf and my tongue is tied;
If thou touchest it idly, the fiery star shoots out!²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

² Fo-kuang 佛光 (1226-1286). Cf. *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 1st Ser., p. 239, 241.

Next Yen-shou, whose realization took place when he heard a bundle of kindling dropping to the ground.

Something dropped! It is no other thing;
 Right and left, there is nothing earthy:
 Rivers and mountains and the great earth,—
 In them all revealed is the Body of the *Dharmarāja*.¹

Here is Ju-ching's verse about a little bell hanging under the eaves.

The whole body is the mouth, hanging in the air;
 It is unconcerned which way the wind blows;
 East or West, North or South;
 Without distinction it gives out its own sermon on the *Prajñā*:
Ti ting tung, ti ting tung, and again *ti ting tung!*²

Dr. Suzuki saw absolute affirmation also expressed in the sayings of Shinran.

For me, Shinran, there is no other consideration; I solely believe in my good teacher's exhortation that we should be saved by Amida exclusively through the *nembutsu*. I am not concerned at all whether the *nembutsu* is the efficient cause for the rebirth in the Pure Land, or is the evil karma bound to the fall in hell; even if I had been deceived by Hōnen Shōnin (my good teacher) and fell in hell as a result, I would never regret it.³

According to Dr. Suzuki the *nembutsu*, which Shinran declared to be the very way of No-Hindrance, is indeed Amida himself, and, at the same time, Shinran himself, that is, absolute affirmation.

¹ Yung-ming Yen-shou, 永明延壽 (904–975). Author of a book called *Shakyo roku* 宗鏡錄 in one hundred fasciculi. See *Ibid.*, p. 234.

² Ju-ching 如淨. Teacher of Dōgen while the latter was studying Zen in China between 1223–1228. See D. T. Suzuki, *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk* (Kyoto, 1934), p. 91.

³ Cf. *Tannishō* (A Tract Deploring Heresies of Faith), Section 2. This tract consists of Shiran's sayings and comments on them by one of his disciples, most probably 唯圓 Yuiyen.

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Dr. Suzuki also paid much attention to the poems of Saichi,¹ one of the most gifted among *myōkonins* in expressing religious experience. Saichi writes:

Amida calling on Amida—

This voice—

“Namu-amida-butsu, Namu-amida-butsu!”²

The *nembutsu* is like vastness of space,

The vastness of space is illumined by *Oya-sama's*³ *Nembutsu*.

My heart is illumined by *Oya-sama*.

“Namu-amida-butsu!”⁴

Oya-sama dwells in the midst of the burning fire of my sufferings,

And calls, “Namu-amida-butsu!”

This is my *Oya-sama*.⁵

On this last verse Dr. Suzuki commented, “‘To dwell’ assumedly has no implication of immovableness; ‘to call’ is ‘to act.’ With the burning fire of sufferings, *Namu-amida-butsu* burns.”⁶ For Dr. Suzuki “*Namu-amida-butsu*,” as well as “Above heaven and below heaven I alone am the Honored One,” were statements of absolute affirmation.

One more fact to be emphasized about absolute affirmation is that, once experienced, it is renewed from then on at every moment of life. It never becomes a past experience; it never passes away. It flashes out “self-luminously,” as Bankei states, on every occasion of response to outward impulses. With absolute affirmation the daily routine of life,—saying “Good morning,” having tea or a meal, working hard or going for a walk—becomes inexpressibly fresh and meaningful. We thus have the following Zen words:

¹ 浅原才市 (1851–1933). Lived in obscurity as a maker of *geta*, a kind of wooden clog. See Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (New York, 1957), p. 143 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³ *Oya-sama*. *Oya* means parent and *sama* is an honorific suffix. Amida was often represented as *Oya-sama* in popular Shin Buddhist sermons.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵ D. T. Suzuki, 日本的靈性 “Japanese Spirituality” (Tokyo, 1944), p. 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

Miraculous deeds and acts of wonder—
I carry water, I fetch kindling.¹

It should be remembered, however, that the mind which is awakened in *satori* or absolute affirmation naturally tends toward the compassionate act of helping those still suffering in the bondage of discrimination to awake in the same *satori*. The mind of absolute affirmation craves to see the same absolute affirmation in whoever and whatever appears before it. This compassion (S. *karuṇā*) is the life of all Bodhisattvas, and is most sublimely expressed in Amida (S. *Amitayus-amitabha Buddha*).² On the eternal quality of the Bodhisattva act, Dr. Suzuki wrote:

He is a Bodhisattva and not an Arhat. His Bodhisattvaship, i. e., Amida enshrined in his heart, will never let him remain complacent and self-absorbed in meditation but cause him to establish in others something of what he is enjoying himself Amida's vow is eternal; he knows that there will be always some beings whose enlightenment is not yet quite fully matured, and therefore he will never rest until the last one is brought to enlightenment and salvation.³

In being desirous of helping others, the Bodhisattva act is doubtlessly purposive. The enlightened ones use all the means and resources which are supposedly effective for this purpose. Nevertheless, their act is purposeless at the same time, because it means absolute affirmation *as it is*; their doing is the doing of non-doing, their purposiveness the purposiveness of non-purposiveness. In this sense, the Bodhisattva act is often compared to "sport," or "playfulness." Hakuin, the founder of modern Rinzai Zen, gave it beautiful expression, to which Dr. Suzuki liked to refer:

¹ Words by P'ang Yün 龐居士, (died 788). See D. T. Suzuki, *Living by Zen* p. 136.

² As for Dr. Suzuki's view of Amida, see specially *The Essence of Buddhism* (Kyoto, 1948), p. 71 ff., besides his works on Pure Land Buddhism.

³ *The Essence of Buddhism*, p. 77.

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By hiring that idiot-sage,
Let us work together to fill
the well with snow.¹

In his later years, Dr. Suzuki was often seen laughing good-humoredly and innocently. He attached much interest to laughing, especially "Zen laughter."² For him laughing was also the "boiling out" of absolute affirmation.

¹ From Hakuin's comments on "the Five Ways" included in his *Keisōdokuzui* 荆叢毒藥. See D. T. Suzuki, E. Fromm & R. DeMartino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1960), p. 74.

² From D. T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Sengai* (not yet published).