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On My First Coming to Meet Dr. D. T. Suzuki

It sometimes happens in one's life that a particular person, or a particular meeting with a particular person, comes to be instrumental in bringing about a radical change in the whole course of that life. In my life, Dr. Daisetz Suzuki was just such a person, and my first meeting with him in March of 1947 was just such a meeting.

I had originally come to know the name, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, two years earlier, in the spring of 1945. At that time, serving with the American Navy at Pearl Harbor, I was auditing, in my off hours, a course on Oriental Philosophy. This course was given in the philosophy department at the University of Hawaii by the department chairman, Professor Charles A. Moore. The text for the course was a book Dr. Moore had himself recently edited entitled, *Philosophy—East and West*. It contained a collection of the papers presented at the first East-West Philosophers' Conference, held at the University of Hawaii during the summer of 1939.

Dr. Suzuki had been invited to this 1939 conference; but because of the illness of his wife, Beatrice Lane Suzuki, who died later that year, he could not attend. He did, however, submit a paper. It was this paper, "An Interpretation of Zen-Experience," appearing in the volume *Philosophy—East and West* which was my initial introduction to Dr. Suzuki—and to Zen.

This introduction, I must confess, did not influence me very much. The essay was simply beyond me. Had my contact with Dr. Suzuki—and with Zen—been limited to this writing alone, the net effect would most likely have been quite negligible.

With the final termination of World War II in August, 1945, I

was ordered to Japan. Learning of this when I bade him farewell a few days before my departure, Dr. Moore said to me, "When you get to Japan, please give my best regards to Dr. Suzuki, if you should ever meet him." I replied that I most certainly would—if I should ever meet him.

I knew that Dr. Suzuki's home was in Kyoto, and that he had taught at Otani University. My own duty in Japan from September, 1945 to February, 1946 was, however, in the southern island of Kyushu. It was not until March of 1946 that I could finally get to Kyoto, but then only to pass through it briefly *en route* to Tokyo preparatory to my return to the United States.

In Tokyo, while awaiting transportation back to America, I decided instead to accept from the United States Government a civilian position as historical consultant to the defense panel of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. This was the tribunal before which former premier Tōjō and twenty-seven other top ranking Japanese leaders were being tried as war criminals.

The demands of my new position were such that the thought of trying to contact Dr. Suzuki faded temporarily into the background. But it never completely disappeared and was suddenly to spring to life again early one Monday morning in February of the following year, 1947.

Riding to work in the special Tokyo bus which ran from the Daiichi Hotel to the International Military Tribunal, I happened that morning to overhear the then United States Naval Commander Denzel Carr, head of the International Prosecution's translation division at the Tribunal, mention to someone that he had visited Dr. Suzuki over the weekend. I immediately went to the rear of the bus where Commander Carr was sitting, and asked him where in Kyoto Dr. Suzuki was living. To my joyous surprise, Commander Carr told me that Dr. Suzuki was no longer residing in Kyoto, but was now living just a few miles from Tokyo in Kita-Kamakura, in a little house within the Engakuji Zen temple-compound. In that moment, I knew at last that the time was not far off when I would finally meet Dr. Suzuki to convey Dr. Moore's greetings.

ON MY FIRST COMING TO MEET DR. D. T. SUZUKI

Some days later, before I had yet been able to make specific arrangements for the visit to Engakuji, I was asked by my very good friend Philip Kapleau, then also with the International Military Tribunal, to join him as weekend guests of a Japanese friend of his. I accepted gladly. Not until the three of us boarded a train in the Tokyo station, however, did I learn that our Japanese host lived in Kamakura.

Instantly, there crossed my mind the possibility of including in the weekend itinerary a side trip to Kita- (i. e. North-) Kamakura. But since I did not know if to suggest this would in any way offend my Japanese host — whom I had only just met, I decided for the time being not to say anything.

As the train on which the three of us were riding left the Ōfuna station and began the turn leading away from the Tōkaidō main line, the Japanese (whose name, unfortunately, I have forgotten) suddenly said to Phil Kapleau and myself that he would like us to get off at the next station — which was not yet Kamakura — because there was someone living nearby whom he wished us to meet. Getting off at the following station, I noticed it to be Kita-Kamakura.

The young Japanese led us first along a dirt and cinder path which paralleled the railroad tracks, and then up a flight of stone steps leading to a large temple gate. Upon entering the gate, I observed a wooden signboard which read, "Engakuji."

I still did not know whom we were to meet, but I felt that in any case it would not, at that point, be impolite to mention the matter of Dr. Suzuki. When I did, it was difficult to determine who was the more startled, the Japanese or myself. For the person he wished us to meet was none other than Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki.

As we walked through the Engakuji temple-compound toward Shoden-an, the particular dwelling which was our destination, I quickly briefed my friend Phil Kapleau on the little I knew of Dr. Suzuki. At the same time, I was trying to imagine to myself the kind of person Dr. Suzuki would be. Somehow I pictured a tall man with a long, flowing white beard and a remote, unworldly appearance who was, in some undefined manner, extremely "Oriental."

After walking some distance, our Japanese friend led us this time up a shorter set of stone steps, through a little wooden fence-gate, and past a small garden. As we passed the garden and turned toward the house, all at once, through the glass panelled *shoji* sliding door of a modest study, there came into full view sitting on his knees, Japanese fashion, in front of a Western typewriter, on which he was pecking away with the index finger of either hand, a little, clean-shaven old man in a black *kimono* wearing, down over his eyeglasses, a Western style green bookkeeper's eyeshade.

Hearing and then seeing us approach, he stopped his typing, arose —standing barely over five feet —and came forth to receive us. Extending his right hand, he immediately welcomed Phil Kapleau and myself in English even before our Japanese friend had completed his own courtesies, explanations and introductions in Japanese. On being formally introduced, after this initial impromptu greeting, I at once conveyed Dr. Moore's salutations. Dr. Suzuki was rather astonished but most pleased to hear of this, and asked, in turn, after Dr. Moore.

Although Dr. Suzuki kept urging us to come in, we felt that since we had made our call unannounced, we ought not to impose any further. So with Dr. Suzuki standing above on the veranda-like *rōka* and the three of us on the ground a few feet below, we all just stood and chatted for a few minutes. But in those few minutes, I definitely knew that although I had completed my "mission" and had delivered Dr. Moore's "message," I nonetheless wanted very much to return for yet another visit with this extremely enchanting person. I asked Dr. Suzuki if this would be possible. He most cordially and gracefully bade me to do so. The three of us then left.

My naïve and fanciful romantic image had been shattered; yet, replaced by the warm, kindly, unassuming figure of this charming little man in a Japanese *kimono* wearing a green Western office worker's eyeshade and speaking an engagingly fluent English, the result was not only all positive but strangely magnetic. I still knew practically nothing of Zen or, indeed, of Buddhism. The short chat had not really touched upon these subjects. Nevertheless, from this

ON MY FIRST COMING TO MEET DR. D. T. SUZUKI

first brief meeting I carried away the irresistible feeling that whatever it was about this alluring figure, there was something here that I greatly desired to pursue further.

I returned to visit Dr. Suzuki for a second time, then a third, and a fourth, until I began to call upon him regularly, at first once a week, and then, in 1948, twice a week—on the weekends. For I became a personal student of his, and began an association which was to last almost twenty years—until his recent death on July 12, 1966.

From this long association, there specially stand out, for me, three other images or “vignettes” of Dr. Suzuki, which I either personally witnessed or was told about. Strangely, all three go back to the early 1950's when Dr. Suzuki was living and teaching in America.

The first occurred in Claremont, California, when Dr. Suzuki was a Visiting Professor at the Claremont Graduate School. One evening he told me at dinner of having been interviewed that afternoon by a reporter from one of the Los Angeles Newspapers. The reporter, it seems, had begun by asking, “What is Zen?” To this, Dr. Suzuki said he answered, “Zen is Zen.” The reporter was apparently nonplussed, but tried again and asked, “Well, when did it begin?” Dr. Suzuki said his response this time was, “In the beginningless past.” Then, turning to face me fully, his face aglow with his soft, slightly impish, but always ingratiating smile, Dr. Suzuki said, “I just felt that way.”

The second was etched several months later at Columbia University, where Dr. Suzuki was, again, a Visiting Professor. He had been introduced, one afternoon, to a lady psychiatrist who had come especially that day to attend his lecture-seminar. During the question period which followed the lecture, this lady psychiatrist began to query Dr. Suzuki on the relationship between Zen and the various clairvoyant powers. Not too well pleased with Dr. Suzuki's general negative attitude toward these questions, she then demanded to know, somewhat belligerently, did not Dr. Suzuki himself have clairvoyant powers. He replied that he did not. The lady was persistent, however, and kept insisting that, despite his open disavowal, certainly

Dr. Suzuki must be able to know the mind of another. With ever so slight a trace of admonishment—rather than exasperation or irritation—Dr. Suzuki turned to the lady and said, “What’s the use of knowing the mind of another? The important thing is to know your own mind.”

The third—in a sense the most uniquely characteristic “vignette” or “tableau” of all—likewise took place in New York, about the same time, one cold, icy March evening. A group of Japanese had taken Dr. Suzuki to dinner at the famous old Miyako Restaurant in midtown Manhattan. One of the Japanese who was present later gave me the following account.

With the snow falling in a sub-freezing temperature that night, the outside flight of brownstone steps leading up to the entrance of the Miyako Restaurant on the first floor was treacherously slippery underfoot. The Japanese hosts were, consequently, most apprehensive and careful in helping Dr. Suzuki, then in his eighties, up the steps, and even more apprehensive, later in the evening, helping him down, after the dinner was over.

As they stood conversing and taking their farewells on the sidewalk after the descent, attention momentarily shifted away from Dr. Suzuki, who happened to notice a small cat dart by and scoot up the steps. At the top of the landing, however, the restaurant door was closed, and the cat, unable to open it, could not get in. While the others were still busily engaged in talking and taking leave of each other, Dr. Suzuki quietly slipped away, gingerly ascended the icy steps, opened the door for the cat, and then began to descend again as the group below, suddenly aware of what had happened, rushed to his side in great consternation. Dr. Suzuki’s only reaction was his large captivating smile.

But strong and unforgettable as these other images are and shall ever remain, the most memorable and the most indelible of all will always be the very first sight I ever had of Dr. Suzuki—there, in March of 1947, deftly sitting on his knees in Shoden-an, leaning over and pecking away at a typewriter, wearing a black *kimono* and a green eyeshade.