

*Daisetz T. Suzuki*¹

The *Shōbō Genzō*, the most celebrated work of the priest Dōgen (1200–1253), founder of the Sōtō Sect of Zen Buddhism, has a strange fascination. The ideas which it expounds cannot be understood by any normal logical processes, yet despite this it has some undefinable, compelling quality. Without a doubt it has its own unique philosophy.

To talk of a philosophy in a Zen context is inevitably to call to mind Daisetz T. Suzuki. The history of Zen thought in Japan affords few examples of men who had an explicit philosophy, much less a systematic one. In fact, if one were to search history for a man to rank alongside Dōgen, Daisetz would be one of the few to come to mind.

Zen, with its rejection of reliance on the written word and doctrine, might seem to deny any explicit philosophy from the start, but this is not so. Indeed, as we shall see later, a Zen deprived of philosophy would lose its creativity.

The main purpose here is not to make a comparison of Dōgen and Daisetz; the disparities between the Kamakura Period (1192–1336), when Dōgen lived, and the present age, make any such comparison pointless. One thing that the two men certainly had in common was the acute sensitivity of their thought-processes. However, they were of basically differing temperaments, and their characters were in many ways complementary. If Dōgen by nature was sensitive to the point of being highly strung, Daisetz might well be described as unconcerned about things to the point of being callous.

In talking of their common qualities and their differences I am,

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perhaps, making comparisons of a kind after all; either way, it is also interesting to note that Dōgen went to China to study the Zen of Southern Sung, while Daisetz went to America, where he studied Western philosophy. Though what they learnt was different, they were alike in being exposed to unfamiliar ideas. They were alike, too, in absorbing what they learnt while at the same time retaining their critical faculty unimpaired. The present age is far more complex than the Kamakura Period. One cannot tell whether Daisetz will ever come to occupy a place in the history of ideas similar to that of Dōgen. Even so, and despite the relative unimportance of philosophy and religion on the surface of history today compared with, say, politics or economics, it seems unlikely that Daisetz's name will ever fall into oblivion. The roots of the ideas he formulated run deep, and such roots do not easily wither even when the sprouts they put forth above the soil are trampled underfoot.

I would liken Daisetz's philosophy to a common weed. The simile, which I will explain in a moment, is borrowed from Dōgen, and I feel it appropriate in considering Daisetz to refer to the writings of one whose name must always call up that of his twentieth-century successor.

To anyone who would object to the simile, I would say that the humble weed is not to be scorned. Most weeds have a robust life-force which belies the frailty of their appearance. Their very robustness can often, in fact, be a source of annoyance—but that is no part of our simile here.

In the "Genjō Kōan" of the *Shōbo Genzō*, Dōgen says, "Flowers fall amidst regrets; weeds live long on neglect." The point here is in the "live long": flowers (he refers here, of course, to the cherry blossom) are beautiful, but have little of the power of survival without which even the loveliest things are doomed to vanish. It is not that Daisetz's philosophy had none of the flower's beauty, but that comparison with a flower gives a wrong idea of its real quality—even though in some respects it was literary and poetic in its modes of expression. The word "neglect," on the other hand, has an unpleasant ring, yet the fact remains that academic study is not some-

thing which can be achieved in the face of too much flattering attention. To be shunned by others actually helps a scholar to devote himself to his work. In his later years Daisetz showed a marked change, becoming almost sociable, but twenty or thirty years previously he was in no sense a good mixer. He stood aloof from others, both personally and in his studies.

An old proverb says, "the hated child prospers long." It often seems to happen, indeed, that those who are generally loved are not long in this world, whereas those who are unpopular live long and prosper greatly. So, too, it is popularly believed that the beautiful woman is destined to die young. It is an odd quirk of the human affections that time spent with what is loved should seem to pass all too soon, whereas every moment spent with an object of dislike drags unbearably. Regret for something that is no more is associated with brevity, with swiftness, whereas dislike is always associated with lengthiness and tardiness. This does not mean, conversely, that the long-lasting and the slow necessarily imply a feeling of dislike, but it does mean that what is long-lasting or slow can never inspire us with that nostalgic sense of time's rapid passage. In their robustness and strength, the weeds that wax so fat on neglect lack poignancy. Daisetz lived—and lived strong and healthy—to the ripe old age of 96. His death, though it may remind us of the fleeting nature of human life considered in terms of eternity, scarcely brought the same poignant regret one feels for the cherry blossom scattered by a single night's rain. If one hesitates to say that he "thrived on neglect," then one is at liberty to substitute "love," but this expression, too, somehow misses the man's essential robustness. As I see him, Daisetz was a man who thrived on—who positively enjoyed—neglect, and who lived life with determination for just as long as he could.

Dōgen died in 1253 at the age of 53. Daisetz lived more than forty years longer. Dōgen's death, perhaps, was the proverbial early death of those whom the gods especially favor. The same can hardly be said of a man who lived as long as Daisetz.

In comparing Daisetz's philosophy with the humble weed I had something else in mind, too. It was two famous poems from the *Shin*

Kokinshū—a famous court anthology of *waka* (31-syllable verse)—which Rikyū (1521–91), the great master of the tea ceremony, quotes in his *Nambōroku*. One of them, by Fujiwara Sadaie, reads: As far as the eye could see/ No cherry blossom, no maple/ At the thatched hut by the bay/ That autumn twilight. The second, by Fujiwara Ietaka, runs: To those who long only/ For the cherry blossom/ I would show spring/ In the mountain villages/ With the grass poking through the snow. Rikyū considered Sadaie's poem as a perfect expression of the Buddhist concept of Nothingness and as embodying the essential spirit of the tea ceremony. The Ietaka poem he sees as an expression of the need, as the next stage, for Nothingness to produce something out of itself—for some differentiated function, as it were, to make itself apparent within the non-differentiated. The twilight autumn scene at the thatched hut—the bleak bay devoid of blossoms, maple leaves, or any color—is blanketed in time with snow, thus expressing still more perfectly the state of Nothingness, of non-differentiation. Yet eventually, with the first rays of the spring sun, the snow will begin to vanish, and from beneath it the first shoots of grass will appear. For Rikyū, this grass poking through the snow was the perfect expression of the mysterious workings of the Void, an understanding of which is necessary if one is to grasp the true spirit of the tea ceremony.

Daisetz's philosophy is, in a sense, like the humble weeds poking through the snow. It exists beyond the blossom and the autumn leaves. It is a philosophy of the Void which recalls that "autumn twilight at the thatched hut by the bay." This philosophy of the Void derives originally from his experience of Zen meditation when he was at the prime of life, but his outlook was broadened by his subsequent studies of Buddhism. Still later, he came to concentrate on Zen and on the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism, which added—especially the Zen—a new depth to the breadth he had already acquired. The philosophy of the Void was expressed in various ways—as the doctrine of "no-mind," as the idea of "nonconceptual conceptualization," and as "the logic of negation." "No-mind" indicates a state of mind which has transcended the need to work in

intellectual concepts — which is another way of expressing the “non-conceptual conceptualization.” The “logic of negation” refers to the belief that the affirmation “A is A” only has any real truth when it is reached via the assertion that “A is non-A.” That “A is A” is a judgment based on ordinary conceptualization. The statement that “A is non-A” represents a transcending of those ordinary conceptual processes, while the reaffirmation of A that follows this is “nonconceptualized conceptualization.” This latter idea has sometimes been referred to as “divine intuition,” a word which Daisetz used frequently around the years 1944–46.

A work published in 1939 which sums up Daisetz's views on the “no-mind” is *Mushin to yūkoto* (On No-Mind). It is significant that in this work he refers to the “activity of the no-mind.”

Daisetz's theories of no-mind, nonconceptualized conceptualization, the logic of negation, and the like are, of course, not original, and clearly owe a great deal to the philosophy of Zen classics and the sutras of *prajñāparamitā* (Hannya-gyō) one of the philosophical cornerstones of Mahayana Buddhism. What gives his ideas on the Void their characteristic quality is his attempt to systematize the idea of Void on the basis of his own thinking and his experience of Zen. Moreover, he was aided, in his attempt to elucidate the special nature of the peculiarly Oriental concept of the Void, by the knowledge of Western ideas which he acquired during his stay in America. In this respect, his treatment of the idea of the Void differs greatly from that of Oriental classicists of the past.

For Daisetz, the quintessence of the “Void” was not the white snow, but the new shoots pushing their way up through it. When one considers how he always considered Oriental thought in relation to Western thought, one might see the grass as itself corresponding to Western thought. In Daisetz's works, thus, the idea of the Void, essentially Oriental though it is, also has some affinities with the ideas of the West. The large number of Western readers which his works have attracted is not a result of the excellence of his English alone.

Let us return, though, to our original theme — “weeds thrive long on neglect.” Few Japanese intellectuals in modern times can

have poured out so many works in their later years as Daisetz. A list of his works shows that he was particularly prolific in the years between 1934, when he was 64, and 1948, when he was 79. Surprisingly, no fewer than nine works were published in the last of those years, 1948. More surprisingly still, the same period saw publication of nine volumes in English as well. Even the weeds could scarcely be more prolific. Even after this he continued to publish new works from year to year, and the whole series of his works—ending with *Tōyō no Kokoro* (The Mind of the East), published in August, 1965, the year before he died—totaled more than one hundred volumes in Japanese and more than thirty in English. To turn out too many works is not necessarily admirable, of course—some philosophers have produced not a single volume—yet in Daisetz's case there were many people who would have liked him if possible to turn out still more. He lived on through three eras—Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa—and every stage was significant in his history; indeed, his position as a figure who went on developing steadily throughout these three eras is remarkable, whether he is considered as a Japanese or a citizen of the world. In this he was different from most other intellectuals. The intellectual, it is believed in Japan, tends to collapse at the first sign of resistance, but Daisetz, despite his small physical stature, had a surprising inner strength and determination. The weed, even for a weed, had its roots particularly deep in the ground.

The ordinary weed bears seeds, scatters them about, and spreads in no time. The shoots that Daisetz put up through the snow will in due time, as spring gives way to summer and summer to autumn, bear their fruit and proliferate. Daisetz himself is no longer of this world, but the seeds which he sowed—weeds though some may call them—will put out shoots in the most unlikely places, in Japan and in the West as well.

Though one talks of "Zen thought," the fact remains that Zen stresses its independence of the written word and of doctrine, and the question arises of how Daisetz could have a "Zen philosophy." A word is necessary here to correct a common misunderstanding of

Zen. A refusal to depend on the written word and doctrine is not the same as saying that the latter are without their uses. It means, ultimately, that one should not attempt to understand in terms of intellectual concepts—that one should not, to put it more crudely, try to understand with one's head. It means that one should experience things directly, without conceptualization—experience them, that is, with one's whole being, and not simply with one's intellect. *Zen* "thought," one might say, is the outcome of thinking without conceptualization. In the many works which Daisetz published, he discusses the nature of "nonconceptualized thought" and how it developed within the *Zen* tradition in the course of history. One might, in fact, sum up Daisetz's *Zen* philosophy as the attempt to apply, as far as possible, the principle of "nonconceptualized thought" in an investigation of those *Zen* teachings which lie outside doctrine and the written word.

Zen as an organized religion tends to carry this nonreliance on written word and doctrine to the point of rejecting all philosophizing as an unnecessary hindrance, but in fact *Zen* without philosophy would be more than a lifeless corpse. *Zen* practice bereft of ideas would deteriorate into a kind of asceticism, a purely physical discipline. Few people can have stressed as strongly as Daisetz that nonreliance on words does not mean that words are useless. All the written works on which he spent his whole life were, in this respect, devoted to the philosophical justification of the idea of a truth incommunicable through written word and doctrine. It is quite certain that it is thanks to Daisetz rather than the *Zen* church that so much interest in *Zen* is being shown today throughout the world.

Despite its proclaimed independence of the scriptures and doctrine, *Zen* has produced more literature than any other Buddhist sect. What is more, this literature is still widely read today. For example, the *Hekiganshū*, compiled in the Sung Dynasty, has been read as the most important work of the *Zen* Sect ever since ancient times by countless readers. However, the *Zen* classics are too difficult to make popular reading today. So it comes about that the works of Daisetz are read and enjoyed by large numbers of people today. The

large number of books produced by Zen is a tangible proof that it does not hold the written word to be useless, and Daisetz's works are a continuation of the same tradition.

As I have said, it seems inappropriate to compare Daisetz and his philosophy with the cherry blossom, somewhat irreverent though the simile of the weeds may seem. It is not that people do not regret his passing, but that he and his ideas just cannot fall and vanish overnight. His physical presence may be no more, but he will certainly live on as an inspiration in men's minds, while his ideas will survive and, in time, spread far and wide throughout the world. That is why I have compared him to the tough, prolific grass and weeds. For all the apparent neglect, the Zen he taught is spreading even among other religions. A considerable interest is being shown in Zen among Christians, for example, despite a certain amount of resistance.

Daisetz departed this earth suddenly on July 12, 1966. I was reminded of a Zen saying: "The flaming clouds of June dispel the white snow"—referring to the way true enlightenment drives out ordinary conceptual understanding. On that hot, humid summer morning the accumulated snow suddenly shifted and fell, crushing the shoots already pushing up through it. At this moment, Daisetz ended his earthly activities. Yet even crushed beneath the snow, the roots of the grass still extend deep into the ground. With the thaw, the grass will put forth new, different shoots.

One final word: some people claim that Daisetz's Zen was the Zen of the Rinzai Sect. It is true that quite a few of his works deal with Rinzai philosophy, but this does not mean it should be taken as Rinzai Zen in the sectarian sense. His ideas are unrelated to any particular Zen sect, whether it be Rinzai, Sōtō, or Ōbaku. It is this fact which gives his Zen its unique character, and it will elude any attempt to fit it into a sectarian framework.