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A Sower of Seeds

In order to find some explanation for the astonishing phenomenon of Dr. Suzuki's life-work it may be helpful to look again upon the time in which he was born and upon the outstanding factors which moulded his character in early years. In 1870, his year of birth, his country, under the leadership of the Emperor Meiji, had just set out on its new course of radical modernization. His father, a hereditary physician ranked in the feudal samurai class, had been divested of his annual grant of rice. The family was left in utter poverty. There were no means to give the boy an education in medicine for which he seemed to have a talent. But, at eighteen, he managed to become a teacher in the little school of a fishing village, teaching arithmetic, reading, writing and a sort of Japanized English, which he had picked up from text-books of the lowest standard.

There appear in this development three characteristic traits: his samurai inheritance which counts for courage, faithfulness, and devotion; his talent for the medical art or, in a broader sense, for clear and keen-eyed observation, attested to by his bodily appearance—the forward stretched position of the head, the lively piercing eyes, the listening ears, the scenting nose; and, a symptom of the early Meiji era, his interest in things abroad—in English, which, as he fancied, should be taught even in the remotest fishing village. At the back of all these qualities we perceive a deep-rooted optimism coupled with a happy tinge of sheer naivety, trusting that in any case the difficulties on the way are there just to be mastered. It is this quality which later led his master to bestow on him that most significant surname, "big simplicity," *Daisetz*.

His mother's death left him alone and free to follow now his

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inmost inclinations. He went to Tokyo to attend informally the new Imperial University. But what attracted him much more, was a new revival of Buddhistic energies centering in the famous Zen monastery, Engakuji, of nearby Kamakura. The leading spirit there was Shaku Sōen, only eleven years older than himself, of a most noble, sensitive, indomitable mind, highly trained throughout his youth by hardest work as well as by a most severe Zen master, and moved by a clear vision of the needs of Buddhism in this time of crisis. He saw the inundation of his country by things foreign, the decline of Buddhist faith and life to mere formality.

Shaku Sōen resolved to counteract this very real danger with his utmost effort. After having got his master Kōsen's attestation, he refused to settle down immediately, as usual, in a temple position. In spite of his great poverty he went to Tokyo for three years to study English, "a thing of no use anywhere for Zen," as his master wrote him, and then put in another three years' preparation by a stay among the fellow Buddhists in far-off Ceylon to learn to read the Pāli scriptures and to understand the differences between their conception of Buddhism and his own. It was for him a time of countless hardships and privations. At his return in 1892 he was at once elected as superintendent of the Engakuji and all its affiliated monasteries. And it seems that Shaku Sōen from the start became aware of his new disciple's particular abilities and began to put some hopes in him. The next year, in 1893, there was a gathering of singular importance to take place, the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a welcome opportunity to give the world a first idea of what Far Eastern Buddhism is worth. Shaku Sōen was resolved to cross a second ocean. He had Suzuki translate his manuscript which was prepared as an address to be delivered at the Parliament. A year later by the intermediation of Shaku Sōen, he rendered *The Gospel of Buddha* by Paul Carus into Japanese.

Such was the beginning of Suzuki's career as the foremost interpreter of Zen for Western nations. And things developed in a way which made it possible for him to get for this, his destiny, the very best equipment he could wish for. During the congress, Shaku

Sōen had become acquainted with Mr. Hegeler, the millionaire owner of a zinc company in Illinois, who together with his son-in-law, Dr. Paul Carus, managed a publishing house devoted to religious and scientific books and periodicals. As Dr. Carus was in need of a translator, Shaku Sōen knew no better man to recommend to him than his young companion. This implied the double confidence that, on the one hand, four years of genuine Engakuji Zen training in the case of this young man would suffice to make him "waterproof" against whatever influences came from outside, and, on the other hand, that there was no better way to counteract a danger than to meet it at its starting-point. There has existed since times of old in the community of Buddhist teachers a sort of prophecy called *vyākaraṇa* (in Japanese, *juki*), work allotment. A master has an insight into his disciple's possibilities and accordingly allots to him a special mission. Shaku Sōen's answer to Mr. Hegeler was nothing less than *juki* put into practice.

Suzuki spent the next eleven years at the Open Court Publishing Company working with Dr. Paul Carus proof-reading, editing, translating from Chinese and Japanese, mastering Sanskrit as well. He also accompanied his master Shaku Sōen on lecture tours in the United States as secretary and translator. During this tour he met an American lady, Beatrice Erskine Lane, whom he later married in Japan. He published his first important book, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* in 1908.

Then, at last in 1908, he left America, copied Sanskrit documents for some time in Paris, translated Swedenborg from English into Japanese in London, and then returned to Kamakura for further studies under the guidance of Shaku Sōen. He was now 38 years old and had already gained a reputation as a unique interpreter of Zen and Buddhism in general to the West. He kept it up for fifty-eight years more incessantly, teaching, writing and lecturing wherever he was welcome, always in that unobtrusive, quiet attitude which did so much to win his hearers.

His literary work, prolific as it is, knows of no other topic but Zen, and Zen again. Even his style of editing is typically Zen-like.

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It is without a system, it shows no reasoned plan; it is a casual series of "essays" and "studies." Some of his books perhaps may disappoint professional scholars. If so, it will not be the author's fault, but that of Zen itself, of which the author is just the congenial organ. And if you turn from his more popular essays to those on difficult subjects, e. g., to his *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra*, you will admire the author's skill in grappling with the intricacies of those dialectic problems and the lucidity of his solutions. His translations of Chinese and Japanese are not in every case verbally correct, but they always hit the mark, and this is, after all, what matters. In case of complicated passages we never find him at a loss to work out a shortcut which leads directly to the goal.

The range of the audiences he visited for lectures and discussions was as broad as was his knowledge. He went and spoke of Zen wherever he was welcomed, be it to philosophers, to theologians or to psychologists. Some anxious people had misgivings; what has Zen to do with psychoanalysis, they asked. But he was not deterred, he knew what he was doing. It is just like Suzuki Daisetz to have discovered all those points of contact between psychotherapy and Zen. Nobody but he, however, saw more clearly the undeniable difference between those two in origin and outlook.

But criticism of Suzuki's apparent unconcern went further. In Germany, a very learned professor of the science of religion has recently reproached him for having more than any other writer contributed to the modern tendency of westernizing the Far Eastern Zen and of depriving it of its essentially religious character. And as a proof of his assertion he points to the deplorable phenomenon of Zen snobbism which recently became a fashion both in America and Europe.

Now, to begin with "Zen snobbism," it suffices to remember the familiar parable in Chapter 13 of the "Gospel According to Matthew":

Behold, a sower went forth to sow; and when he sowed, some seeds... fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth; and forthwith they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth, and when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away.

Apparently the truth of this example already has begun to realize itself. A friend of mine who recently returned from the United States told me of the owner of a bookshop whom he had met and asked about the present situation of his trade. The bookseller's laconic answer was: "Zen is out, sex is in."

Suzuki Daisetz was a sower of extraordinary energies and perseverance. He continued what his master Shaku Sōen at the Parliament of Chicago in 1893 had begun more than seventy years before: namely, to draw the attention of humanity to the phenomenon of Zen, and nothing more. This is a perfectly legitimate undertaking from the Western point of view.

But critics may go further, asking: What about Suzuki's legitimacy within his own confine, in Zen? Was the seed he sowed true Zen or false? Here lies a trap for specialists in the science of religions. Every religion establishes for its adherents a standard of its own. You cannot encounter a Christian with a Buddhist measure. And a follower of Zen can only be judged by a Zen measure. Do we really know what the Zen measure is? Did not perhaps Suzuki Daisetz know a little more about it? At any rate he readily confessed himself to be a sinner, because through all his life he spoke and wrote of things transcending speech and script. It was in this sense also, I suppose, that he signed his works with his most enigmatic surname. "Daisetz" can at the same time mean "of great simplicity" and "a great simpleton." He confessed his sins, but went on "sinning." He represented in himself a genuine Zen kōan, enigmatical indeed for Western forms of thought. It has a striking similarity with the eighth Example of the *Hekiganshū*, where Suigan, after having spoken all the summer long, asks his hearers whether he had not lost his eyebrows. Three of his old comrades make their remarks about him, one rather negative, the other positive, the third one, Ummon, cuts them short. "Barrier (*kwan*)," he says and bars discussion about things which lie beyond it.

Incidentally, it might be useful to remember that, generally speaking, the attitude of Buddhism towards "outsiders" is much more lenient than that of other religions, including Christianity. But gain-

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ing the assent of others, a certain adaptation, the use of "skilful means" (*S. upaya, J. hoben*), is not only recommended—for instance in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*—but has been practiced in degrees compared to which those innocent connivances on Suzuki Daisetz's side just count for nothing.

As regards myself, I must confess that I for many years have underestimated the high significance of Suzuki Daisetz's personality and work. The change came only after I had formed the resolution to study the *Hekiganshū*, of which, in spite of its supreme importance, no complete translation was at hand. I had begun with incomplete editions, current in Japan, which disappointed me, and had ordered Katō Totsudō's big commentary from Japan. Just about that time, in September 1954, Dr. Suzuki appeared in Germany for lectures at Marburg University and at Stuttgart. I had the honor of interpreting for him. One of his points in speaking was that Zen prefers spontaneous action to worded explanation. "We need not tell a good friend that we like him. A friendly tap will do." Saying this, he tapped my shoulder and the audience was delighted.

He agreed with my discontent over incomplete editions of the *Hekiganshū*, saying that in fact such books did not deserve that title (which is quite true, because they leave out just the most important part of Engo's contribution to Setchō's collection). On the way to Stuttgart in the railway car, he read a Chinese book in Chinese binding: it was a Japanese edition of the *Hekiganshū* in two volumes. At Stuttgart, when we parted, he took them out, wrote on each his dedication and presented them to me quite unceremoniously. In whatever he did there was not a shadow of ado. But for me it was, first of all, the decisive encouragement which I needed to take up the work. And in the course of years, it changed into a sort of mandate binding me to carry on in spite of all the difficulties implied. I need not add that from this time his books became to me quite indispensable, especially his studies on the sutras from which Zen derives its views; my admiration for his scholarship reached its height through the study of his books on the *Lankavatara-sūtra*.

But to conclude, I must report a personal experience of the

summer 1954. While he was sitting with me in the lobby of a hotel, a woman, apparently distressed, approached and asked entreatingly to be received. As she knew no English, I served as interpreter. The details of the conversation are omissible. But what I never can forget is the quiet, sober, sympathetic attitude in which the eighty-four year old modest gentleman listened to her penetrating questions, the smooth and simple kindness of his appeasing, comforting, encouraging replies and the serene vivacity of his look. He had his hands folded on the table, and at the end he drew his right hand out and held it almost hesitatingly towards her. At last she grasped it, and we parted. In July 1966, when I informed her that the venerable man had died, she answered, "He, at that time, saved my life."

We are living in an age when East is no more East and even West is no more simply West. The streams of life, of faith, of human brotherhood are flowing all around, and gradually they float historical barriers away. It is a situation which calls, on every side, for a broad mind in particular, and all the more, for deep and firm reliance on and in the ground in which our lives originate and in which alone we are at home.