Poisoned Pen Letters? D.T. Suzuki's Communication of Zen to the West

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Introduction

Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki (1870–1966) has been widely celebrated as the first transmitter of Japanese Zen to the 'West'[1], especially the USA and Great Britain.[2] In the course of his long life, he published dozens of books that practically defined the meaning of Zen for western audiences. In recent decades, however, the shine on Suzuki's reputation has been somewhat worn off by some heavy criticisms.

First, Suzuki has been accused of complicity with Japanese nationalism and thus tainted by the jingoism of *nihonjinron* (the view that Japanese culture was uniquely superior).[3] This has prompted accusations that he reconciled Zen with killing and warfare, and so legitimated military aggression towards China, Korea, and Russia (Victoria, 1997). Second, he has been accused of misrepresenting Zen by ignoring its history (Hu Shih, 1953), its sectarian status (Faure, 1993), its Buddhist provenance (Sharf, 1995), as well as its ritual context. These criticisms amount to a charge that Suzuki basically ignored the way in which Zen is a historically produced Buddhist sect embedded in a specific cultural field. Third, Suzuki has been charged with presenting Zen in an over-intellectual manner without recognizing the importance of spiritual practices, such as meditation (*zazen*), and therefore of ignoring important historical Zen figures such as Dōgen (1200–53) and the Sōtō tradition in his voluminous writings (Faure, 1993). At the extreme, Suzuki is accused of making up his own version of Zen that was not really Zen at all, simply his fantasy idealization of it. Consequently, so the argument goes, many of the received understandings of Zen, both of scholars and the wider public, are seriously flawed because of Suzuki's distorted presentation of the subject.

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[1] This term is problematic since it buys into the 'Orientalist' assumptions pointed out by Said (1995). We will also see that the Japanese used the concept of 'West' polemically in constructing the 'Occident' as opposed to the spiritual 'Orient'.

[2] See, for instance, Abe (1986).

[3] For instance, by Sharf (1995). Sharf defines this position as 'a popular discursive enterprise devoted to the delineation and explication of the unique qualities of the Japanese, which invariably touts the cultural homogeneity as well as the moral and spiritual superiority of the Japanese vis-à-vis their peoples' (p.136).

This essay attempts an assessment of Suzuki's contribution to Zen – especially as understood in the USA and Britain – by weighing these criticisms and considering them in the light of Suzuki's overall impact. It takes into account Suzuki's particular historical circumstances, which informed the way he both spoke and wrote about Zen, as well as Suzuki's individual cultural and philosophical formation, which also had an important bearing on his style of thought and communication. In other words, in the language of Bourdieu, it takes into account the 'cultural field' within which Suzuki operated, as well as his particular *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1993).

Section one examines Suzuki's personal circumstances; in particular, it traces the influence of Sōen Shaku and Paul Carus on his intellectual and spiritual development. Section two situates Suzuki's individual experiences within a broader cultural context, in order to show how that context informed the account of Zen that he later developed. Section three develops some of the issues and themes raised in the first two sections by exploring Suzuki's views about the nature of religion and, in particular, of Japanese spirituality. Finally, section four seeks to characterize Suzuki's presentation of Zen by identifying some of its distinctive emphases. In doing so, I aim to show that his reading of Zen was both highly sectarian and fatally flawed.

1. Personal context: decisive influences

Suzuki was born in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan, the son of a physician. After time spent working as an English teacher, in 1891 he became a student at Waseda University, Tokyo. During this period, he began practising Rinzai Zen under Sōen Shaku (1859–1919) at Engakuji monastery, Kamakura, and later took up residence there. In 1893, Suzuki translated Sōen's address to the World's Parliament of Religions where Sōen met Paul Carus (1852–1919), a meeting that was to have a profound impact on the young Suzuki's future. Carus was a German émigré and editor of the Open Court Publishing Company who became a proponent of what he called the 'Religion of Science'. He believed in the notion of a universal religion, purged of all superstitious trappings and irrationality. Such a religion would be in complete harmony with science. Influenced by his meeting with Sōen, Carus subsequently produced *The Gospel of Buddha According to Old Records*, an anthology of passages from Buddhist texts assembled from existing translations, together with bits he had himself written which he thought summed up the Buddhist message. Suzuki later translated this into Japanese. We will return to Carus shortly.

Suzuki studied with Sōen until 1897 by which time an arrangement had been made for Suzuki to go and study with Carus in the United States. Shortly before his departure he was credited with the realization of *kenshō* and was given the name Daisetsu, 'Great Simplicity'. Sōen and Carus were perhaps the most

formative individual influences on the understanding of Zen, and of religion generally, that Suzuki came to develop.

We can learn something of Sōen's approach to religion and to Zen from his *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot* (1906). The book was based on a lecture tour that Sōen made of the United States in 1905, and Suzuki translated it. In his preface, Suzuki acknowledges the degree to which he has reorganized and rewritten the material including changing language where it seemed 'too Buddhistic' (Sōen, 1906, p.iv). This has prompted me to wonder how far the *Sermons* represent an accurate record of Sōen's own thought and teaching and how far they are in fact Suzuki's 'revisionary Zen'. What is certainly striking about the sermons is that they seem to incorporate most of the distinctive emphases that Suzuki was to make in his later career. For instance, Sōen emphasizes how spiritual awakening is 'beyond intellectual demonstration' (ibid., p.132). He also distinguishes between *dhyāna* and *prajñā* (ibid., p.137), though he seems to value meditation more highly than Suzuki came to, offers a universalist vision of spiritual experience (ibid., p.138), and an idealized presentation of the Oriental mind:

> The Oriental mind ever strives after the One and is so idealistic in all its tendencies as sometimes altogether to ignore the external world. (Ibid., p.148)

Such a *nihonjinron* vision of the Oriental (more properly the Japanese) mind is contrasted with that of 'Occidentals' who 'lack the unfathomableness' (ibid., p.153) of the Orientals. Sōen concludes that, 'Generally speaking… the West is energetic, and the East mystical' (ibid., p.154). He also offers a dubious exoneration of killing in the context of war:

> The hand that is raised to strike and the eye that is fixed to take aim do not belong to the individual, but are instruments utilized by a principle higher than transient existence. (Ibid., p.196)

In this remark, Sōen would appear to remove individual responsibility for war acts since the good soldier is acting according to a 'higher power'; killing for one's country therefore becomes an act of self-transcendence, even a spiritual act by means of which one goes beyond the individual ego. It is worth noting that the lecture tour took place around the time of the Russo–Japanese War (1904–5).

Sōen also offers an evolutionary vision of the Buddhist tradition, a theme that Suzuki would develop in his *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*. In part protesting against the essentialism of Pāli scholars who privileged the early Buddhist texts and saw the later traditions as degenerations, Sōen wrote:

> For Buddhism, like many other religions, has gone through several stages of development before it has attained its present stage of perfection

> among Oriental nations… Properly speaking, Hīnayāna Buddhism is a phase of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The former is preparatory for the latter…
>
> The Buddhism of present Japan, on the other hand, is Mahāyānistic. It is more comprehensive, more religious, more humanistic, and more satisfying to the innermost needs of the religious consciousness. (In Lopez, 2002, p.36–7)

These are very bold claims. He later concludes:

> In the Buddhism of Japan today are epitomized all the essential results reached through the unfolding of the religious consciousness during the past twenty or thirty centuries of Oriental culture. (Ibid., p.37)

Thus contemporary Japanese culture represents the apogee of religious development and this development is coterminous with Buddhism. A little later we will see how Suzuki amplified some of these points but before doing so let us return to Carus and his influence on Suzuki.

After translating his *Gospel*, Suzuki went to work for Carus in LaSalle, Illinois (1897–1908). In his study of this period of Suzuki's life, Bando (1967) concluded:

> It may be said that the inception of all his philosophical and intellectual activities thereafter can be traced back to this period. (p.138)

This claim seems to somewhat overstate the case since the thumbnail sketch offered above of Sōen Shaku's views shows that Suzuki's outlook had already been significantly shaped before his encounter with Carus, albeit in a manner on the whole sympathetic to Carus' own views. Notwithstanding, there is no doubt that this period in America influenced Suzuki and helped to germinate his understanding of religion and what was to become his presentation of Zen.

In summarizing Carus' preface to *The Gospel*, Lopez writes:

> Here Carus makes clear his project to present Buddhism in its ideal form, free from the complications presented by the accretions of sects and history. His ultimate goal is to lead his readers to the Religion of Science, towards which Buddhism and Christianity, when understood correctly, point the way. (Lopez, 2002, p.25)

Carus himself voices his intentions when he writes:

> The present book follows none of the sectarian doctrines, but takes an ideal position upon which all true Buddhists may stand as upon a common ground. (In ibid., p.26)

For someone with as limited knowledge of the Buddhist tradition as Carus must have had, this is an ambitious claim. We can see here a prevailing preoccupation of late nineteenth-century thought – and a theme that was central to the World's Parliament – which is the notion of universal or world religion (Ketelaar, 1990). Carus wants to propose that there is some common core that unites all Buddhists and which therefore defines the essence of what Buddhism means. Yet he later concedes that he is determined to read the Buddha's life in the light of its 'religio-philosophic importance' and so in editing the various texts he 'has cut out most of their apocryphal adornments, especially those in which the Northern traditions abound' (in ibid., p.26).

Carus' agenda therefore becomes clear; he believes that the mythological elements of Buddhism – indeed of religion generally – are introduced to make the Buddha's doctrines amenable to the masses (ibid., p.29). He does not see them as integral to the Buddhist message. This is important because Carus wants to argue that both Buddhism and Christianity, in varying degrees, reveal a 'cosmic religion of truth' (ibid., pp.28–29) that transcends all sectarian divisions. It is in favour of such a cosmic religion that Carus wants to proselytize. This notion of a universal religion, beyond sectarian differences, became important to Suzuki in the way that he came to define Zen.

We can now consider in more detail how the views of Sōen and Carus helped to shape Suzuki's understanding of religion and of Zen. Since religion is the more general category, we will begin with this. In *Outlines*, Suzuki suggests:

> If the Buddha and the Christ changed their accidental places of birth, Gautama might have been a Christ rising against Jewish traditionalism, and Jesus a Buddha, perhaps propounding the doctrine of non-ego and Nirvāna and Dharmakāya. (Ibid., p.29)

Such speculation affirms the notion of a universal 'spirit of religion' (ibid., p.23), independent of any particular historical form or doctrine. In explaining what he means by this Suzuki writes:

> By the spirit of religion I mean that element in religion which remains unchanged through its successive stages of development and transformation: while the form of it is the external shell which is subject to any modification required by circumstances. (Ibid., p.23)

It would seem then that the 'spirit' of religion is universal and perennial but its 'form' specific and temporal. Suzuki also asserts that religion 'must work in perfect accord with the intellect', and that 'Religion and science, when they do not work with mutual understanding, are sure to be one-sided' (ibid., p.26). Carus had also emphasized both these themes.

It is also worth noting that Suzuki held to an immanent explanation of religion; he believed that religion emerges from the individual's spiritual needs and experience. He wrote, for instance:

> The abiding elements of religion come from within, and consist mainly in the mysterious sentiment that lies hidden in the deepest depths of the human heart, and that, when awakened, shakes the whole structure of personality and brings about a great spiritual revolution, which results in a complete change of one's world-conception. (Ibid., p.28)

While this vision of the true origin of religion may be attractive and poetically expressed, it betrays anything but a universalist understanding. To claim, for instance, that 'religion comes from within' would be to contest the notion of revelation, a leading idea in several religions, not least Christianity. In fact, Suzuki's vision of religion as presented here is an immanent version of Buddhist teaching, displaying the obvious influence of Buddha-nature thought – as much of East Asian Buddhism does.[4] It appears that Suzuki universalizes what is in fact a particular religious vision.[5] He is really talking about Zen insight but stripped of its traditional vocabulary. This kind of move allowed Suzuki to go on to claim that Zen represents the essence of religion, as we will see.

The irony of Suzuki's position is that while he could be read as succumbing to the hegemonic intentions of institutions like the World's Parliament of Religions, he in fact subverts those intentions for his own ends. John Henry Barrows (1847–1902), Chairman of the Parliament, declared, for instance:

> We believe that Christianity is to supplant all other religions because it contains all the truth in them and much else besides. (In Ketelaar, 1990, p.139)

While the 'Orientalist' aspirations of some western scholars and religious figures sought to annex all that was of value in Buddhism to some universalized form of Christianity, Suzuki, far from buying into their agenda, actually turns it back on themselves.[6] Suzuki then operates what might be called a 'reverse Orientalism' or Occidentalism,[7] which seeks to incorporate what is of value in,

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[4] For a discussion of this important doctrine see King (1991), Stone (2003) and Hubbard & Swanson (eds.) (1997).

[5] In making a similar point, Faure (1993) suggests that it is characteristic of Zen sectarian approaches to claim that they are in fact universal (pp.55–8).

[6] Said describes Orientalism in the following way: 'Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (1995, p.3).

[7] Faure (1993) calls this an Orientalism 'by excess' (p.53).

for instance, Christianity, in a universalized vision of Buddhism (and more specifically Zen). Suzuki did not simply imbibe Carus' project and regurgitate it unthinkingly but rather turns the sword of Orientalism back on itself. In section three, I will develop this theme by considering Suzuki's account of Japanese spirituality.

2. Cultural context: nationalist responses to persecution

The cultural field in which Suzuki grew up was one of insecurity and change as far as Buddhism was concerned. The Meiji Restoration (1868) had led to a period of fairly rough treatment for Buddhist institutions and practitioners. Collcutt (1986) has shown that even before the Meiji period significant repression of Buddhism had been going on. This continued during the Meiji period, though its intensity diminished. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that in the 1870s to 90s, and even beyond, Buddhism was in retrenchment and most definitely under threat. The power of the state was growing, the power of the Sangha diminishing. This was the world into which Suzuki was born and within which he encountered Buddhist teachings.

Brian Victoria (1997) has shown that one of the primary responses to this process on the part of Buddhists was to align themselves with the nationalist concerns of the ruling government. In order to avoid persecution – and therefore potential extinction – the vast majority of Buddhist leaders chose to subordinate their morals and spiritual values to the questionable nationalist and even colonialist aspirations of the Meiji regime. Suzuki's own spiritual director, Sōen Shaku, was no exception. Sōen is known, for instance, to have gone even to the battlefield to deliver rousing talks to help inspire the troops and aid them to see the rightness of their cause (Victoria, 1997, p.26).

It was perhaps inevitable that Suzuki's attitudes towards war and the state would be influenced by Sōen's attitude. For instance, Victoria quotes from Suzuki's first written work, published in 1896 – just a month before his supposed Awakening experience (*kenshō*):

> The purpose of maintaining soldiers and encouraging the military arts is not to conquer other countries or deprive them of their rights or freedom… The construction of big warships and casting of giant cannon is not to trample on the wealth and profit of others for personal gain. Rather, it is done only to prevent the history of one's country from being disturbed by injustice and outrageousness… if there is a lawless country which comes and obstructs our commerce, or tramples on our rights, this is something that would truly interrupt the progress of all humanity. In the name of religion our country could not submit to this. Thus, we have no choice but to take up arms… in order that justice might prevail. (In ibid., p.109)

Out of context, such a quote seems reasonable. The situation becomes more complex if such a point of view is then used to defend, for instance, Japanese colonialist activity in China and Korea. Are these states 'lawless'? Do they 'interrupt the progress of all humanity'? Suzuki might perhaps be forgiven for his youthful naiveté and thus for succumbing to nationalist rhetoric in a piece that might be written off as juvenile but Victoria's case against Suzuki also draws on his more mature writings. In particular, Victoria identifies Suzuki's writings about Zen and swordsmanship as embodying the same spirit as his earlier nationalist sentiments.

In his *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, Suzuki writes extensively on the theme of 'Zen and Swordsmanship' as well as 'Zen and the Samurai'. Since any student of Buddhism will know that *ahiṃsa* (non-harm) is one of the cardinal principles of Buddhism (see, for instance, *Majjhima Nikāya*, III, p.46ff.), Suzuki had his work cut out to reconcile what appear to be mutually contradictory themes. Suzuki himself recognizes this apparent contradiction (1938, p.34) but goes on to offer several reasons why Zen is compatible with the Samurai spirit. He writes, for instance, that:

> Zen discipline is simple, direct, self-reliant, self-denying, and this ascetic tendency goes well with the fighting spirit. (Ibid., p.35)

This may well be true but it does not really address the issue that if Zen is a form of Buddhism, it will be committed to non-violence, a stance that would seem radically at odds with the spirit of the Samurai. It is here that the problematic nature of Suzuki's presentation of Zen begins to show its darker side. Throughout his writings, Suzuki is determined to show that Zen is an intuitive experience, not fixed to any particular set of concepts or ideas. It is because he takes such a view that he can go on to say:

> Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy with a set of concepts and intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death and this by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible to adapt itself almost to any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or a political or economic dogmatism. (Ibid., p.36)

This is a problematic claim. It is certainly true to say that Buddhism generally does not aim simply to instil a body of dogma but rather to catalyse the experience of Awakening (*bodhi*) (see, for instance, *Sutta Nipāta*, chapter 5). But at the same time the importance of Right View (*samyak dṛṣṭi*) as a platform for spiritual awakening is widely stressed (see, for instance, *Dīgha Nikāya*, I, p.1ff.). Buddhist teachings are seen as the means towards spiritual awakening and,

while they do not in themselves embody the ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*) but only the relative (*saṃvṛti satya*), they are not arbitrary (see Williams, 1989, pp.4–15 and 75–6). In a well-worn simile, the Buddhist teachings are a raft that enables passage to the further shore of Awakening (*Majjhima Nikāya*, I, pp.134–5). In the section quoted above, Suzuki goes so far as to admit that some teachings or ideas might 'interfere' with the intuitive teaching, yet he clearly does not think that dogmas like fascism would necessarily do so.

These considerations strike at the heart of what is problematic about Suzuki's presentation of Zen. While he is surely correct that the aim of Zen practice is to realize a state of spiritual awakening (the 'intuitive' experience that he refers to), it is also important to recognize that this awakening does not happen in a vacuum but requires a carefully prepared context. This context includes ideas and beliefs as well as rigorous spiritual practices. In emphasizing the 'intuitive' characteristic of Zen experience, Suzuki seems to ignore the conditions necessary to prepare for this experience.

Suzuki engages in a lengthy discussion of the historical links between Zen and the Samurai, in particular focussing on the theme of Bushido ('the warrior's way'). He points out that warriors needed an ascetic spirit and that they also needed to keep the idea of death before them night and day (ibid., p.48). Suzuki clearly sees such a reflection as a Zen one. But he seems to conflate two quite different things: it is one thing to say that the Samurai *appropriated* various themes from Zen practice and teaching, it is quite another to suggest that the two traditions are in harmony. Suzuki seems to argue from the historical linkage between Zen and the Samurai towards some spiritual correspondence. This does not seem justified without further support.

In his conclusion concerning Zen and the Samurai, Suzuki states:

> Zen did not necessarily argue with [the Samurai] about immortality of the soul, or about the righteousness of the divine way, or about ethical conduct, but it simply urged to go ahead with whatever conclusion rational or irrational a man has arrived at. (Ibid., p.64)

Such a statement encapsulates a Zen stripped of all its Buddhist credentials. Ethics (*śīla*) is no longer important;[8] all that matters is that one *act* on one's convictions (seemingly, no matter whether they are cruel or compassionate). In such conclusions, Suzuki's Zen parts company with any version of traditional Buddhism. It becomes a 'system' that can be aligned to any philosophy, whatever its provenance or its ethical flaws.

In later writings, Suzuki expresses a less positive view of the role of violence and even military action. In *Japanese Spirituality*, for instance, Suzuki condemned

[8] On the importance of ethics in Buddhism see, for instance, *Dīgha Nikāya*, I, p.204ff. and *passim*.

the apparent alliance of Buddhism and the state, particularly as this expressed itself in the Second World War. He writes, for instance:

> As militarism became fashionable in recent years, Buddhism put itself in step with it, constantly endeavouring not to offend the powerful figures of the day. As a result, Buddhists… neglected to awake within the Japanese religious consciousness the philosophical and religious elements, and the spiritual awakening, that are an intrinsic part of Buddhism. (In Victoria, 1997, p.148)

It would seem then that Suzuki himself took no responsibility for the alliance of religious and military interests, despite his active promotion of the unity of Zen and swordsmanship, and Bushido. Victoria sees in Suzuki's post-war Japanese writings a continuing attempt to defend Japanese aggression, even while condemning it (1997, pp.50–1). But Suzuki told a different story to his English-reading audience. He writes, for instance:

> The Pacific War was a ridiculous war for the Japanese to have initiated; it was probably completely without justification. (In Abe, 1986, p.24)

Victoria points out that nowhere in any of Suzuki's writings is there even a hint of regret for Japan's other colonial and military efforts in, for instance, China, Korea, and Taiwan (1997, p.151).

While Victoria's overall assessment of Suzuki in relation to militarism is rather damning, Kiyohide Kirita has offered a much more sympathetic reading of Suzuki's views on this matter. Drawing on the same sources as Victoria, Kirita comes to a rather different assessment of Suzuki's views of the state and of *nihonjinron*. For instance, Suzuki wrote in his first published work in Japanese, *A New Theory of Religion*:

> Religion never hesitates to question the existence of the state and history; the state always acts on the basis of its own self-centred interests. In this way, religion and the state are incompatible. (In Heisig & Maraldo, 1994, p.53)

These hardly seem the words of a nationalist appeaser. Yet elsewhere in the same work Suzuki proposes that the role of religion is 'first of all to try to support the state and to abide by the history and sentiments of its people' (in ibid., p.53). These statements seem rather at odds with one another and may well reflect a youthful Suzuki (he was in his mid-twenties) who was confused about what he thought. In later writings, he expresses criticisms of the Imperial family and questions the greatness of the Japanese people (ibid., pp.54–5). Kirita argues that Suzuki condemned the linkage of Zen with war and where he could not actively condemn it, he chose to write on more general Zen subjects (ibid., pp.60–1). Kirita quotes, for instance, the following:

> Some people think that to die recklessly is Zen. Zen absolutely never teaches one to throw one's life away. (Ibid., p.61)

While this could be read as a criticism of the 'kamikaze squadrons' of the Second World War, it does not, however, represent a condemnation of war and aggression generally. Kirita acknowledges that Suzuki's writings link Zen and the Samurai class in Japanese history but suggests that this does not mean that Suzuki thought this entailed a linkage between Zen and modern warfare. Kirita's conclusion is that:

> [Suzuki's] intention was to show that since Zen experience is itself value-neutral, it can be adapted to various times and societies. (Ibid., p.72)

But it is this emphasis on the value-neutrality of Zen that is precisely the problem, allowing Zen to be co-opted by any regime no matter what its ethical underpinnings.

3. SUZUKI, JAPANESE SPIRITUALITY, AND *NIHONJINRON*

In considering Suzuki's views on the uniqueness and special character of Japanese spirituality, the depth of his prejudices and his jingoism becomes more explicit. But before looking at Suzuki's own views in more detail, it is worth recognizing how his views participated in a general current of modern Japanese thought: *nihonjinron*. We have already learnt that Sōen Shaku held to some rather dubious generalizations about the nature of the 'oriental mind' and how he compared the western mind unfavourably with it, but such Occidentalism was in fact more broadly sponsored. In the words of Robert Sharf, *nihonjinron* was:

> [A] popular discursive enterprise devoted to the delineation and explication of the unique qualities of the Japanese… [and was] in large part a Japanese response to modernity – the sense of being adrift in a sea of tumultuous change, cut off from the past, alienated from history and tradition. (Sharf, 1995, pp.136–7)

Sharf cites a range of thinkers and writers whose works belong to this genre, including leading philosophers like Nishida Kitarō, a personal friend of Suzuki (ibid., pp.135–8). Suzuki's writings must be placed in the context of this cultural field. His own views are perhaps expressed most fully in his *Japanese Spirituality*. An examination of this text reveals the connections that Suzuki makes between Japaneseness, spirituality (*reisei*), and Zen. He writes:

> The Japanese felt a kind of satisfaction when they saw the shape of their spirituality reflected [in Zen]. *From the beginning* there has been something in Japanese spirituality that could be regarded as 'Zen-like'. Since this

> was awakened by the chance appearance of Zen, it would be confusing cause and effect to say that Zen is foreign. (1972, p.23; my italics)

He also speaks of 'the Zen character of Japanese spirituality' (ibid., p.19) and claims that 'Buddhism… is really a manifestation of Japanese spiritual awakening' (ibid., p.59). Suzuki appears to claim that, even before Zen came to Japan, there was an innate character to Japanese spirituality that harmonized with Zen; Zen became the occasion for the activation of Japanese spirituality, rather than the means by which it was produced. The fact that Japanese spirituality was activated through a Buddhistic form was a 'historical accident' (ibid., p.18). This implies that Zen is not really Buddhist (or at least not exclusively so).

In analysing the character of Japanese spirituality, Suzuki writes:

> [I]t exists in its purest form in Jōdo (Pure Land) thought and in Zen… since in my view Buddhism is not primarily an imported, religion, I feel that neither Zen nor Pure Land possesses a foreign nature. (Ibid., pp.17–18)

Shinshū experience is really nothing else than the exercise of Japanese spirituality. That it emerged within a Buddhist context was a matter of historical chance – it does not prevent in the least the essential quality of the Shin sect from being identified with Japanese spirituality (ibid., pp.20–1).[9]

What is puzzling about these passages is that we have already learnt from Suzuki that Japanese spirituality is Zen-like, yet we now learn that Shin experience also expresses the essential quality of Japanese spirituality. This seems to imply that Shin thought must also be Zen-like which is clearly false; Shin Buddhism and Zen are very different things.[10] Notwithstanding, Suzuki tries to wed these apparently distinct streams of 'Japanese spirituality' by claiming:

> Pure Land experience is manifested on the affective or emotional side of Japanese spirituality; on its intellectual side appears the transformation to Zen of Japanese life… The emotional development of Japanese spirituality points to the unconditional Great Compassion of the Absolute One… Amida, [which] is neither hindered by evil nor

[9] Elsewhere he writes: 'Pure Land thought existed in India as well as China, but only in Japan did it assume, via Hōnen and Shinran, the form of the Shin sect. That sequence of events must be said to have been dependent upon the active manifestation of Japanese spirituality… It was absolutely necessary that the influence of a great and powerful force emerge from within Japanese spirituality. When this influence was expressed through Pure Land thought the Shin Sect was born' (Suzuki, 1972, p.20).

[10] For an overview see Ueda & Hirota (1989).

> broadened by good; it is absolutely unconditional, it transcends all discriminations. It cannot be experienced without Japanese spirituality. (Ibid., p.21)

It seems that either only Japanese people can experience the compassion of Amida or that, in order to do so, other peoples must necessarily begin to participate in Japanese spirituality. Suzuki argues from the historical uniqueness of Jōdo Shinshū as a Japanese phenomenon towards an ahistorical, essential Japanese spirituality. While the question 'Why did Jōdo Shinshū emerge in Japan and yet not in China?' is intriguing, it is far from obvious that the answer is to be found in a latent, special Japanese spirituality.

In reflecting on such issues, David Dilworth (1978) has proposed that Suzuki exposes himself as a 'regional ontologist' who is committed to the view that there is something fundamentally different in the make-up of the Japanese people that has inspired its spiritual sensibility rather than it being formed by a particular historical and cultural experience. This unique spirituality awakened during the Kamakura period. Suzuki thus reveals himself to be some kind of neo-Hegelian historicist, charting the disclosure of *Geist* through the course of Japanese history.

In insisting that Japanese spirituality is 'Zen-like', Suzuki seems to downgrade other religious forms, yet wants to claim that Jōdo Shinshū also expresses the unique nature of Japanese spirituality. When he attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction by calling upon the 'emotional' and 'intellectual' sides of the Japanese character he surely fails, because the entire thrust of Suzuki's proposal about Japanese spirituality is its 'Zen-like' character, not its 'Jōdo-like' character. Clearly he is attracted to both Zen and Jōdo Shinshū – nothing wrong in that – but his own accounts of religion, Zen, and Japanese spirituality are not consistent with the legitimacy of Shinshū spirituality.

Before proceeding to a more detailed discussion of Suzuki's account of Zen, it is worth pausing to reflect on why he was so concerned to show that both Zen and Jōdo Shinshū were distinctly Japanese rather than foreign. He writes, for instance:

> Though [Zen] came to Japan by way of China, its imported character altogether vanished following its introduction, and it became Japanese. There appears to be an essential rapport between Zen and the Japanese character. (Ibid., p.46)

It must not be forgotten that the Japan into which Suzuki was born and enculturated was one whose relations with continental Asia were fraught. In particular, Japan's relationship with China was problematic and, perhaps partly in reaction against its cultural debt to China, Japan was concerned to assert its cultural independence and singularity. In addition, China had become an

enemy and through the Sino–Japanese War (1894–5), the Manchurian crisis (1928), and further armed invasion in 1932, Japan had established itself as a colonial power on the mainland (not forgetting the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910). Far from being a 'cultural client' of China and Korea – which Japan effectively was – the Meiji period was concerned to show the cultural superiority of Japan; this meant severing Chinese cultural links. Suzuki's insistence that Zen was essentially Japanese (and therefore not Chinese and Korean) must be seen in the light of this cultural movement. It could be suggested that this move formed part of an essential survival strategy for Japanese Zen, however unhistorical it was in reality.

4. Characterizing Suzuki's Zen

We can now sketch out in more detail Suzuki's characterization of Zen and examine its reliability. In doing so, we will assess several potentially devastating criticisms.

In his first series of *Essays in Zen*, Suzuki seems to recognize that the best place to understand the meaning of Zen is in the meditation hall (1927, p.253), yet – as is well known – he went on to produce dozens of books explaining what Zen really is. He goes on to say:

> As I conceive it, Zen is *the ultimate fact of all philosophy and religion*. Every intellectual effort must culminate in it or rather must start from it, if it is to bear any practical fruits. Every religious faith must spring from it if it is to prove at all efficiently and livingly workable in our active life. Therefore, Zen is not necessarily the fountain of Buddhist thought and life alone; it is very much alive also in Christianity, Mohommedanism [*sic*], in Taoism, and even in positivistic Confucianism. What makes all these religions and philosophies vital and inspiring… is due to the presence in them of what I may designate as the Zen element. (Ibid., p.254; my italics)

This passage is crucial in identifying what is problematic about Suzuki's conception of Zen. Notice that Zen is not defined in historical terms as a strand of Buddhism that developed in China and was then transported to Japan; instead, for Suzuki, Zen is 'the ultimate fact of all philosophy and religion'. In other words, Zen is not really Buddhism at all but it is *the* universal religion or spiritual truth. We will return to this universalizing of Zen later.

It is certainly true that elsewhere (see, for instance, *Zen and Japanese Buddhism*, p.3) Suzuki recognizes both Zen's Buddhist provenance and its Chinese origin but his prevailing emphasis seems to be on an idealized, ahistorical version of Zen. Among others, Hu Shih has criticized Suzuki for failing to pay sufficient

regard to the historical and cultural emergence of Zen as a spiritual tradition. He writes:

> The Ch'an (Zen) movement is an integral part of the history of Chinese Buddhism, and the history of Chinese Buddhism is an integral part of the general history of Chinese thought. Ch'an can be properly understood *only in its historical setting* just as any other Chinese philosophical school must be studied and understood in its historical setting. (Hu Shih, 1953, p.3; my italics)

According to Hu Shih, in order to understand what Zen is – its aims, objectives, and constraints – one must understand its historically contingent emergence. As is well known, however, Suzuki was fond of pointing to the *ahistorical* nature of Zen and the way in which it cannot be understood or approached through ordinary thought. Suzuki writes that 'Zen is above space–time relations, and naturally even above historical facts' (in ibid., p.4). This would seem to remove Zen from the investigation of any historian or intellectual inquirer. And it would seem that this is precisely Suzuki's intention. For instance, elsewhere, he writes that 'To study Zen means to have Zen-experience, for without the experience there is no Zen one can study' (in Lopez, 2002, p.69). In other words, unless one has had Zen experience (that is, *kenshō* or *satori*), one can never know anything about Zen.

The problem here is that the referent of the term Zen is not clear. For Hu Shih, Zen is an historically produced spiritual tradition with certain teachings, teachers, practices, and so on, but for Suzuki, Zen is an experience, the historical expression of which is merely the outer trappings:[11]

> Zen must be understood from the inside, not from the outside. One must first attain what I call prajñā-intuition and then proceed to the study of all its objectified expressions. To try to get into Zen by collecting the so-called historical materials and to come to a conclusion which will definitely characterize Zen as Zen, Zen in itself, or Zen as each of us lives it in his innermost being, is not the right approach. (1953, p.27)

Suzuki takes a high line here: unless one has had Zen experience then any historical knowledge of Zen counts for nothing. This is a common argument about the irreducibility of religion – a deliberate exclusion of the outsider's attempt to study and investigate it. Zen can only be understood by the 'elect', the 'realized'. Such a line provides Suzuki with a convenient means of dismissing any remarks that Hu Shih, or indeed any other scholar, may wish to make about Zen; they do not have Zen experience and therefore their comments about it cannot be accurate. In addition, given that Suzuki presents

[11] For an intelligent discussion of this dispute, see Sellmann (1953).

himself as someone who does have Zen experience, his commentaries on Zen therefore become self-authenticating – they are by definition veridical.

Suzuki's characterization of Zen centres on a distinction between *dhyāna* and *prajñā*. For Suzuki, *dhyāna* is simply 'meditation' or 'a concentrated state of consciousness' (1958, p.3). *Prajñā*, or *prajñā*-intuition as he often calls it, is something else altogether. This is a 'higher spiritual power' (ibid., 3) and the means by which we attain *bodhi*, spiritual awakening. While such a characterization is fully in accord with basic Buddhist doctrines of spiritual awakening, one of the implications of Suzuki's distinction is an apparent downgrading of the value of meditation. Suzuki's lack of emphasis on the role of meditation in the attainment of *prajñā*-intuition is striking; he constantly emphasizes the goal but seems to place little or no emphasis on what has traditionally been considered one of the primary methods for achieving it. For instance, in speaking about Sōtō Zen, he writes:

> The Sōto school of Japan lays very much weight on the study of Dōgen's 'Essays' as well as on sitting quietly facing the wall. (1958, p.43)

At first sight, this remark seems innocuous but on further reflection seems to embody a studied dismissal. First of all, there is a seeming reference to over-intellectualism in Sōtō, given that the study of Dōgen's (1200–53) works is emphasized. For Suzuki, this is not really Zen because Zen is 'beyond words and letters' and the ordinary mind – it is about 'intuition'. In addition, though, to describe Dōgen's teaching of *shikantaza* as 'sitting quietly facing the wall' is to seriously misrepresent its soteriological significance. Meditation in Sōtō Zen is a manifestation of 'ceaseless practice' (*gyoji*); practice and attainment (enlightenment) are understood as not separate. As Dōgen writes:

> In the Buddha Dharma, practice and realisation are identical. Because one's present practice is practice in realization, one's initial negotiation of the Way in itself is the whole of original realization… As it is already realization in practice, realization is endless; as it is practice in realization, practice is beginningless. (In Abe, 1985, p.106)

The introduction of Dōgen into the discussion of the meaning of Zen is apposite. While Suzuki claims to speak on behalf of Zen, it is clear that, even while claiming that Zen is about *prajñā*-intuition, he excludes from his discussion what is in fact the dominant Zen tradition in Japan – Sōtō. Zen, in Suzuki's writings, becomes specifically Rinzai Zen (with its emphasis on kōan practice) and, moreover, a Rinzai Zen stripped of a good deal of its historical setting. Throughout his writings, Suzuki seems concerned to present his own idealized version of Rinzai as 'normative Zen', more or less ignoring Dōgen and Sōtō. For instance, in one of the few places where Suzuki does get around to describing practical methods of Zen instruction he mentions a verbal method

and a direct method. Under neither of these headings is *shikantaza* considered (Suzuki, 1927, p.257), effectively excluding it from the Zen arena.[12]

This point highlights what appears to be one of the most significant limitations of Suzuki's version of Zen: its lack of practical instruction. Suzuki is himself gracious enough to admit that:

> The Zen master, generally speaking, despises those who indulge in word- or idea-mongering, and in this respect Hu Shih and myself are great sinners, murderers of Buddhas and patriarchs; we both are destined for hell. (1953, p.31)

Yet throughout his life Suzuki poured forth what Arthur Koestler has called a verbal diarrhoea (Fader 1980), telling his readers how Zen is beyond words and conceptualization. In his unrelenting emphasis on 'pure experience' (Suzuki, 1957, p.69), Suzuki fails to offer practical methods for its attainment. This is, in part, due to Suzuki's subitist approach; that is to say, Zen is something realized 'suddenly' rather than 'gradually'.[13] However, it is also in large measure a consequence of Suzuki's dehistoricization of Zen. His removal of Zen from its living cultural and religious context and his elevation of it into something like the one true spirit of religion results in his neglect of the specific and particular forms of spiritual practice that Zen has generally offered. He is fond of recounting kōans and retelling stories that seem to show the unpredictable spontaneity of Zen masters but is short on guidance about how to proceed with their application.

In what appears to be an appeal to an intellectual, western audience, Suzuki is keen to downplay, and even ignore, the ritual context that surrounds Zen practice. Yet a number of studies have shown how important this context is. In discussing medieval Sōtō Zen, Bodiford, for instance, remarks:

> Japanese monks reproduced the Chinese monastic norms and practices in Japan. They mastered the unique idiom of the Chinese kōan and studied Chinese Ch'an literature. Yet medieval Sōtō monks also assumed many of the popular functions of the traditional Japanese ascetic. The magico-religious undercurrents of Dōgen's monasticism increasingly came into the foreground as Sōtō monks attempted to address their traditional rituals to a rural Japanese audience. (Bodiford, 1993, p.210)

Even this short passage calls into question several central claims that Suzuki makes about Zen. Its Chinese provenance is here shown to continue to influence its Japanese expression; Zen shows itself to be steeped in ritual (and Bodiford gives much detail on this – such as giving the Buddhist precepts to

[12] See Faure (1993), pp.55–8 for a discussion of this area.

[13] For a discussion of this complex debate see Gregory (ed.) (1988).

animals; ibid., p.214), and it is heavily involved in textual study. In speaking of kōan, Bodiford writes:

> Rather than mental conundrums or meditation exercises, kōan were *studied* as models of truth or idealized statements of truth. (Ibid., p.213; my italics)

5. Conclusion

Suzuki has had an astonishing influence on the reception and understanding of Zen in the USA, Europe, and no doubt the wider world; many of his books are still in print, and they remain widely read and cited.[14] For the casual inquirer, he has often provided their first encounter with Zen, yet his unsuspecting reader will have been in no position to judge whether he or she has been given the real deal or just taken for a ride. In the absence of competing presentations, few readers have been able to critically appraise Suzuki's account of Zen. On closer examination, and particularly with the emergence of more European-language writings about Zen – both by academics and practitioners – the selective, sectarian, and even individualistic character of Suzuki's approach becomes more apparent.

Suzuki's high sounding appeals to 'intuition', 'pure experience', and going beyond logic have seduced many, and his removal of Zen from much of its traditional context of practice made its goal seem achievable for anyone. In fact, though, Suzuki offered what can only be described as 'mouth-Zen', a simulacrum of the real thing, even a product to be consumed. Instead of having to go the 'hard yards' that Zen spiritual practice truly demands, readers have been offered a tantalizing – yet ultimately unreal – promise of some idealized spiritual condition.

In stripping away the rituals, traditions, and practices of Zen, as well as its cultural and historical development, Suzuki dismantled Zen as a religious phenomenon. While his emphasis on the goal of Zen is perfectly legitimate, his lack of attention to the path removes the possibility of its realization.

But there are more sinister aspects to Suzuki's presentation of Zen. One of these is his emphasis on Zen as a transcendence of morality. So he writes, for instance:

> Morality always binds itself with the ideas of good and evil, just and unjust, virtuous and unvirtuous, and cannot go beyond them… Zen is, however, not tied up with any such ideas; it is as free as the bird flying, the fish swimming, and the lilies blooming. (1950, p.13)

[14] An Amazon search revealed around two dozen titles still available.

Such a position on morality, while perhaps technically correct from the point of view of realization, is not true from the point of view of the path (see, for instance, *Dīgha Nikāya*, I, p.63ff.). The result of it was, however, that Suzuki felt able to harmonize Zen with the Samurai, with nationalism, and with Japanese military, even colonial, aggression. Zen therefore became an amoral force.

Finally, Suzuki's version of Zen results in a rather uncomfortable equation. First, Zen is seen as 'the ultimate fact of all philosophy and religion' and, second, it is 'the expression of the Japanese character' (1938, p.216). This would seem to lead to the conclusion that the Japanese character expresses the ultimate fact of religious experience, perhaps in a way that is unique. This results in a version of Zen steeped in Japanese triumphalism, and what Sharf describes as 'a studied contempt for the West' (Sharf, 1995, p.131).

If Zen is uniquely Japanese and yet is also the measure of genuine spirituality, this implies that the Japanese are, in some way, uniquely spiritually advantaged. If Zen is the foundation for all religious life, can non-Japanese people aspire to this? Suzuki does not give a categorical answer, yet his writings imply that at the very least the Japanese have a unique spiritual endowment. Thus, while on the one hand seeming to universalize Zen and offer its possible realization to non-oriental aspirants, on the other Suzuki removes this possibility through both his cultural triumphalism and his reticence about how Zen is to be lived and practised.

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