

## D. T. Suzuki, “Suzuki Zen,” and the American Reception of Zen Buddhism

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Perhaps no single individual has had greater influence on the introduction of an Asian religious tradition in America than Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the Japanese Buddhist scholar whose very long life spanned the period from the early years of Japan’s Meiji Restoration through the American counterculture of the 1960s. Almost single-handedly, he made Zen Buddhism, previously unknown to Americans, a focus of interest. For prominent intellectuals, religionists, and creative artists as diverse as Alan Watts, Erich Fromm, Thomas Merton, and John Cage, as well as numerous American Zen enthusiasts, the Japanese scholar was accepted as the final authority on the Zen experience. Hailed in 1956 by historian Lynn White as a seminal intellectual figure whose impact on future generations in the West would be remembered as a watershed event, Suzuki has more recently come under sharp criticisms. Scholars such as Bernard Faure and Robert Sharf charge that in his desire to reach a Western audience, the Japanese writer greatly altered Zen’s teachings, creating a Westernized “Suzuki Zen” that has misrepresented the traditional Zen message.<sup>1</sup> In the present essay an attempt will be made to evaluate Suzuki’s career, presentation of Zen to Americans, and the arguments of his critics. Special attention will be focused upon the formative years he spent in America between 1897 and 1908, which, I suggest, exercised a decisive influence on his success as a transmitter of Zen to the West.

Born in 1870, only three years after the Meiji Restoration committed Japan to modernization, Teitaro Suzuki grew up in an impoverished samurai family in Kanazawa on the western coast of Japan. Suzuki's father died when the boy was only six, leaving his widow and five children in dire economic circumstances. Despite mounting difficulties, young Suzuki continued his education until he was seventeen, when the family's financial problems forced him to drop out of school. Fortunately, his studies had given him sufficient acquaintance with English that he was able to find employment as an English teacher, a crucial linguistic acquisition in view of his subsequent career as an interpreter of Zen to the West. However, his mastery of the language must have remained very limited: He recalled many years later that the English he had taught as a young man "was very strange—so strange that later when I first went to America nobody understood anything I said."<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the financial backing of a brother, he was able to continue his education at Waseda University and Tokyo's Imperial University. In view of his later international reputation as a scholar, it seems surprising that he never completed his college studies; his only degree was an honorary doctorate bestowed upon him at the age of sixty-three by Kyoto's Otani University.

Suzuki's first exposure to Zen Buddhism began quite early, as his family observed Zen practices. Troubled by the early death of his father and the family's financial problems, at one point he sought out the priest of a small Rinzai Zen temple in his home city of Kanazawa. Apparently the experience proved disappointing. "Like many Zen priests in country temples in those days," Suzuki would later recall, "he did not know very much."<sup>3</sup> Soon after his move to Tokyo to continue his studies at the Imperial University, he made the thirty-mile trip to Kamakura, where he became a follower of Kosen Imagita, the abbot of the important Rinzai Zen temple Engakuji; and, following Kosen's death, became a disciple of Kosen's replacement, Shaku Soen (also known in the West as Soyen Shaku and Shaku Soyen), who would become a major influence on Suzuki's life.<sup>4</sup> During the later nineteenth century Buddhism was going through a very difficult time in Japan, assailed by sharp attacks on all sides while being forced to accept the Meiji government's expropriation of its income-producing properties as the nation moved toward modernization. Caught between Shintoists and nationalists on one side and Western-oriented reformers on the other, Buddhist leaders responded by attempting to redefine the Buddha's message as a "new Buddhism," emphasizing a more universal, more scientific approach.<sup>5</sup> Soen played a lead-

ing role in the creation of this “new Buddhism,” participating in an 1890 conference of Buddhist leaders in Japan that sought to unify the tradition’s different groups, which culminated in the compilation of a document entitled “The Essentials of Buddhist Teachings—All Sects.” As a disciple of Soen, Suzuki was clearly influenced by the more cosmopolitan, universal conception of Buddhism embraced by his teacher.

Though his writings would come to be regarded by most Americans as the definitive statement of Zen Buddhism, it should be noted that Suzuki remained a Buddhist layman always, never completing the formal training necessary to become a Zen priest. He did pursue Zen enlightenment for several years under the guidance of Soen and claimed in his 1964 memoir that, just before his departure for America in 1897, he had finally achieved a breakthrough.<sup>6</sup> At this time Soen gave his young disciple the name Daisetz, usually translated as “Great Simplicity.” (Suzuki would later inform Western admirers that, in fact, his name should be rendered as “Great Stupidity.”)

Meanwhile, developments in faraway America were about to intrude, which would dramatically transform Suzuki’s life. The precipitating event was the World Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, where representatives of the world’s major religions were invited to present their teachings. An unprecedented gathering, the Parliament attracted a number of Asian religious spokesmen, including the charismatic Swami Vivekananda, who spoke for Hinduism at the congress, and the Sinhalese Anagarika Dharmapala, who championed Buddhism. Suzuki’s spiritual mentor, Soen Shaku, attended as a member of the Japanese Buddhist delegation, and his paper “The Law of Cause and Effect, as Taught by Buddha” was read to the assembled audience.<sup>7</sup> During the Parliament’s sessions Soen became acquainted with Paul Carus, the German American philosopher and editor of *The Open Court*, who had developed an interest in Buddhism. They became friends. When Carus subsequently prepared a compilation of the Buddha’s major teachings, *The Gospel of Buddhism*, he sent a copy of the book to Soen in Japan, who instructed his disciple to prepare a Japanese translation. Carus then set out to translate the Tao Te Ching and asked Soen to suggest someone who could assist him with the translations. In response, Soen recommended Suzuki. Soen revealed to the *Open Court* editor that his young protégé had been so “greatly inspired” by Carus’s works that he strongly desired “to go abroad” to study under Carus’s “personal guidance.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, in 1897 at the age of twenty-seven, Suzuki made the long journey to La Salle, Illinois,

then a small mining town outside Chicago, where he would remain for the next eleven years.

If Soen Shaku served as Suzuki's spiritual guide, Paul Carus became his intellectual mentor, who in some ways influenced Suzuki's future career and writings even more profoundly than his Japanese teacher. With a PhD from a German university, Carus had impressive credentials to introduce his Japanese assistant to the profundities of Western philosophy. In addition to his fairly extensive writings on Buddhism and Asian thought, Carus served as editor of *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, important philosophical journals at the turn of the century. As Carus's assistant, Suzuki performed a wide variety of tasks, though he devoted most of his time to assisting Carus with his Asian translations and carrying out editorial tasks connected with the publication of *The Open Court* and *The Monist*. As a result of these duties, his mastery of English rapidly improved—a fluency that would prove crucial in his future career as an interpreter of Zen to the West.<sup>9</sup>

One of the two men's earliest collaborations was a translation of the Tao Te Ching. Suzuki laboriously translated word-for-word from Chinese into English, which Carus then put into his own words, after comparing his assistant's version with available European translations. In 1906 they prepared translations of two other Daoist works, published as *T'ai-Shang Kan-Ying P'ien* and *Yin Chin Wen*, and then undertook a translation of the Analects of Confucius. During these years in La Salle Suzuki also translated a number of Carus's other writings into Japanese, including a pamphlet on Chinese philosophy and several Buddhist short stories.<sup>10</sup> Happily, Suzuki found time for his own research and writing as well. Over his eleven years as Carus's assistant, the young Japanese published his first scholarly reviews and articles in English, including brief pieces on Confucius and Buddhism in *The Open Court* and more extended essays on Asvaghosa, the first Buddhist Council, and early Chinese philosophy in *The Monist*.<sup>11</sup> Finally, during these crucial formative years Suzuki also published his first two scholarly books in English, a translation of Asvaghosa's *Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (1900) and his pioneering *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907).

Suzuki's extended sojourn in America was critical in shaping his future career as a Zen transmitter to the West in several ways. First and perhaps most important, it gave him the necessary skills—a familiarity with Western philosophic conceptions, command of English, and editorial experience—needed to reach Western readers. His publication of some thirty books in English, which sold widely among

Western readers, emphasize how well he learned from the American apprenticeship. Second, the eleven years under Carus's tutelage greatly furthered his education as a future scholar. With the rise of research universities in the later nineteenth century, aspiring scholars were forced to spend years in graduate school honing their research and writing skills. Suzuki, who stopped short of a bachelor's degree, acquired the basic skills under Carus's direction at the office of the Open Court Publishing Company. Trained in one of Germany's ranking universities and holding a doctorate in philosophy, Carus was superbly equipped to initiate the young Japanese into the complexities of Western scholarship and philosophical analysis.

The evidence of Carus's influence on Suzuki may be detected in the close similarities between the two men's approach to scholarship. Like Carus, Suzuki combined scholarship and advocacy, with both men going well beyond disinterested analysis in their promotion of personal philosophic and religious positions. Suzuki's emphasis on Buddhism's compatibility with modern science closely paralleled Carus's insistence on the compatibility of science and religion. And it is surely no coincidence that when Suzuki subsequently founded the *Eastern Buddhist* as a vehicle for the promotion of Buddhist scholarship, its format and contents mirrored that of *The Open Court* and *The Monist*. Like Carus's journals, the *Eastern Buddhist* offered its readers popular as well as scholarly articles and emphasized both English translations and philosophical expositions of Asian religious works.<sup>12</sup> Without the extended apprenticeship under Carus, Suzuki might still have made his mark as a Buddhist scholar; but it seems unlikely that he would have become one of the twentieth century's most influential proponents of Asian thought.

Suzuki left America to return to Japan in 1908 at the age of thirty-eight, where he would remain for the next forty years with the exception of occasional trips abroad. During his return to Japan, he stopped off in Europe for several months to copy Buddhist manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale and for two months at the Swedenborg Society in London, where he undertook a Japanese translation of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*. Though usually passed over, Swedenborgianism obviously exerted considerable attraction for Suzuki at this time, another indication perhaps of the impact of his years with Carus. He seems to have become aware of Swedenborg while assisting Carus through contact with Albert Edmunds, a Swedenborgian and Buddhist scholar who frequently contributed to *The Open Court* and *The Monist*. As is well known, the Swedish philosopher's thought was an important influence on

a number of nineteenth-century American thinkers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and the elder Henry James, father of psychologist William James. At the Swedenborg Society's invitation, Suzuki returned to England a second time in 1912 to translate three other Swedenborgian works into Japanese—*The Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom*, *The New Jerusalem*, and *The Divine Providence*—and he subsequently published an introduction to the Swedish mystic's thought, *Swedenborugu*, for Japanese readers. Perhaps because he subsequently realized that many of his American and European readers would be uneasy about Swedenborgianism, Suzuki almost never mentioned the Swedish philosopher again in later years.<sup>13</sup>

Suzuki's life and career may be usefully divided into three periods: the years from 1870 to 1908, the time of preparation and his American apprenticeship; the period from 1909 to 1949, which he spent largely in Japan teaching and engaged in scholarship; and the final years from 1950 to 1966, when he resumed contact with the West and achieved international fame. After his return to Japan in 1909, Suzuki filled a series of teaching positions before accepting a 1921 appointment as professor of Buddhist philosophy at Otani University, where he would spend much of the remainder of his life. He never allowed his teaching duties to divert him from scholarship, and indeed, in the decades after his return to his homeland, published volume after volume on Buddhism, Zen, and traditional Japanese culture. With his wife Beatrice Erskine Lane, he also founded and co-edited *The Eastern Buddhist* in 1921. The landmark volumes that would establish his reputation and fame in the West now appeared in rapid succession: the first volume of his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927), his *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (1930), and the second and third volumes of the *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1933 and 1934), followed by *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk* (1934), *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), the *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (1935), and *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (1938). Composed in English, these volumes once again demonstrated his acquired fluency in the language. The works became bibles to eager American Zen students after World War II.<sup>14</sup>

During the interwar years Suzuki for the most part lived the quiet life of a scholar. Thanks to his books and rising international reputation, he played host to a steady stream of Western visitors interested in Buddhism, including Charles Eliot, James Bissett Pratt, L. Adams Beck, Dwight Goddard, Kenneth Saunders, and Ruth Fuller. In 1936 he returned to the West for the first time in over two decades to participate in a World Congress of Faiths organized by Sir Francis

Younghusband in London. During this visit, Suzuki met and entered into a lifelong friendship with Christmas Humphreys, who became one of the West's most active promoters of Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> While abroad the Japanese scholar lectured at universities in Great Britain and the United States before returning home to Japan in 1937, as the dark clouds of World War II were rising. Though his books were attracting increasing attention in the West, the numbing events of World War II would delay Suzuki's wider Western impact until after 1945.

The coming of World War II and the ascendancy of militarism in Japan placed Suzuki in a precarious position. The fact that he had spent over a decade in the United States, married an American woman, and published extensively in a Western language, undoubtedly raised the suspicions of Japan's militarists. At a time of extreme nationalist feeling when all things Western were frowned upon, it is not surprising that his publications in English largely ceased after 1938, to be replaced by a flood of Japanese publications. Led by Brian Victoria, some recent scholars have raised disturbing questions concerning the degree to which Suzuki, as well as members of the so-called Kyoto School led by Suzuki's close friend and philosopher Nishida Kitarō, supported the Japanese war effort during World War II. Critics note that Suzuki's spiritual mentor Soen Shaku had hailed Japanese victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars; that, beginning in 1935, Suzuki's writings increasingly emphasized *nihon-jinron*, the innate spirituality and distinctiveness of Japanese culture; and that during the war years and after Suzuki never denounced Japan's attacks on its neighbors. Meanwhile, in such writings as *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, published in 1938, he emphasized the close connection between Zen and the warrior ethic of Bushido, which critics have pointed to as the basis for "war Zen" or "soldier Zen." Suzuki wrote: "The soldierly quality, with its mysticism and aloofness from world affairs, appeals to the will-power. Zen in this respect walks hand in hand with the spirit of Bushido."<sup>16</sup>

While critics such as Victoria have clearly raised important questions about Suzuki's position, defenders have stepped forward to counter the charges. Drawing upon materials not included in the Japanese scholar's *Complete Works*, Kirita Kiyohide argues that Suzuki never accepted the concept of an absolute state and early in his career questioned the role of the imperial family in magazine articles and personal correspondence. According to Kirita, Suzuki clearly disapproved of the recklessness and parochialism of the militarists and always remained isolated from Japanese politics, with no connection to the militarists. Moreover, in the years after the war he had urged

his Japanese compatriots to reject state Shintoism and worship of the state. Revisiting the issue in 2001 with a focus on the ethical implications of the Buddhist response to the war, Christopher Ives argues that the critics have not and cannot demonstrate a real linkage between writings emphasizing what he calls the “Zen-bushido connection” and the actions of Japanese soldiers and kamikaze pilots in the actual war zone. Ives concludes that the flowering of Japanese militarism before and during the war years had complex, multiple roots.<sup>17</sup>

What conclusion may be drawn? At the very least it seems clear that Suzuki chose to go along with, or at least not to resist, his nation’s war efforts. This hardly seems surprising for the time: Most intellectuals in Western as well as Asian societies—with some notable exceptions—supported the war aims of their respective governments. The tendency to link his views to those of the Kyoto School philosophers seems overextended; though a close friend of Nishida’s, he cannot be held responsible for his friend’s or the other members of the Kyoto School’s views. And the fact that he emphasized the Zen-Bushido connection in some passages of his scholarly writings hardly qualifies him as a flag-waving militarist or a major contributor to the Japanese war effort. At most, his scholarly writings would have provided very limited encouragement to the Japanese military, who would rarely have read his works. In retrospect, one might wish that Suzuki had resisted the militarists; instead, he chose to wait out the war, retreating to his study to concentrate upon scholarship and writing.

It could be argued that Suzuki’s return to the United States in 1951 as a lecturer on Buddhist philosophy at Columbia University ignited the American Zen boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Amazingly, the venerable Japanese author was already eighty-one when he began his lectures at Columbia. Stimulated by the Beat movement’s celebration of Zen—led by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder—young people across the country began to turn to Zen Buddhism and to Suzuki’s books as never before. Overnight, the Japanese octogenarian found himself a celebrity who was constantly sought out by curiosity-seekers as well as by prominent writers, theologians, and psychologists. Born five years after the close of the American Civil War, astonishingly, Suzuki became something of a spiritual hero to many young people in the 1950s and 1960s. Winthrop Sargeant’s admiring profile in *The New Yorker* in 1957 suggests Suzuki’s iconic status. Describing the unique impression made by the Japanese scholar, who regularly lectured on Friday afternoons at Columbia, Sargeant wrote:

Despite his great antiquity—he is eighty-seven—he has the slim, restless figure of a man a quarter of his age. He is clean-shaven, his hair is closely clipped, and he is almost invariably dressed in the neat American sports jacket and slacks that might be worn by any Columbia undergraduate. The only thing about him that suggests philosophical grandeur is a pair of ferocious eyebrows, which project from his forehead like the eyebrows of the angry demons who guard the entrances of Buddhist temples in Japan.<sup>18</sup>

Over the following years Suzuki attracted a distinguished audience to his Columbia lectures, where he continued to teach until 1957. At one time or another his listeners included neo-Freudian psychologists Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, modernist composer John Cage, and philosopher Huston Smith, among others. Philip Kapleau, who subsequently underwent Zen training at a temple in Japan and became one of America's best-known, native-born teachers of Zen, also attended. While Suzuki's lectures charmed those able to attend his classes, most enthusiasts had to rely on his books for acquaintance with Zen. Opportunely, the 1950s paperback revolution occurred at just the right time, making his books available to a popular audience at very low cost. Though he also wrote extensively on Mahayana and Shin Buddhism, the works that captured the American public's imagination were unquestionably the books on Zen. Serious students perused the three-volume *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, but most readers undoubtedly preferred his more popular expositions such as *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, a concise summary of barely one hundred pages. Other works that attracted a wide audience included his *Manual of Zen Buddhism* and *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Many readers (including the author) gained their first exposure to Suzuki's writings through such popular anthologies as William Barrett's *Zen Buddhism* (1956) and Bernard Phillips's *The Essentials of Zen* (1962), which offered selections from the Japanese Zennist's vast body of writings.<sup>19</sup>

If Suzuki presented the essentials of Zen Buddhism with an authority and lucidity unmatched by any other scholar in his time, it is clear that he also brought his own special understanding and interpretation to the task, which later commentators began to refer to as "Suzuki Zen." Several elements may be said to distinguish his presentation of Zen. First off, the emphasis throughout his writings reflected his Rinzai Zen background and preferences. Reading Suzuki, one might never have realized that, historically, Zen in Japan included

not only the Rinzai school but also Soto and Obaku Zen. Rinzai's emphasis upon the role of riddles or koans and the sudden achievement of spiritual enlightenment or satori contrast sharply with Soto Zen's emphasis upon prolonged sitting or zazen and the belief that illumination develops gradually. Thanks to Suzuki's influence, Zen for most Americans *was* Rinzai Zen. The Rinzai emphasis on nonsensical answers and paradox obviously appealed to many Westerners in the post-World War II era who were also drawn to existentialism and Freudianism. (If the Rinzai tradition dominated American Zen in the 1950s and 1960s, in recent decades Soto Zen has achieved a growing American acceptance, led by such Japanese teachers as Shunryu Suzuki, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, and Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi, who founded the Zen Center of Los Angeles.)

Secondly, in his presentation of Zen, Suzuki emphasized inner experience rather than rituals, doctrines, or institutional practices. Writing in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Suzuki insisted that "Personal experience, therefore, is everything in Zen. No ideas are intelligible to those who have no backing of experience." In this respect, he distanced himself from the institutionalized practices of Zen temples in Japan. Ultimately, he viewed the inner Zen experience as universal, as the spirit or essence underpinning all religions. "Zen professes itself to be the spirit of Buddhism, but in fact it is the spirit of all religions and philosophies," he wrote.<sup>20</sup> When he did bother to notice Zen's institutional form, he criticized its narrowness and sectarianism. By downplaying the rituals of institutional Zen while stressing Zen's emphasis on experience and its universality, he obviously widened Zen's appeal for Americans.

Thirdly, as presented in Suzuki's writings, Zen offered an activist viewpoint that called for engagement with the world, again an emphasis largely missing in the traditional Zen of Japan. He found the rationale for such an interpretation in the Zen monastery rule "No work, no eating," noting that the daily life of a Zen monk required a continuous round of cleaning, cooking, and farming. At one point he even referred to the Zen ideal as a "gospel of work."<sup>21</sup> On another occasion he went so far as to describe the Zen approach as a "radical empiricism," an interesting choice of words that linked the ancient Japanese tradition to the modern philosophical positions of American pragmatists William James and John Dewey. If the ultimate Zen goal remained individual realization, "Suzuki Zen" did not ignore the responsibility for social action. Writing in 1951, the Japanese scholar suggested that Zen was as "socially-minded" as "any other religion," though its spirit had been "manifested differently." He proclaimed

that the Zen monastery was not meant “to be a hiding place from the worries of the world.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, despite his insistence on Zen’s irrationality and nonlogical nature, “Suzuki Zen” presented the Zen experience as a coherent and all-embracing perspective on reality—in effect, as a philosophy. I say this while recognizing that throughout his writings he again and again asserted that Zen Buddhism was neither a philosophy nor a religion and while acknowledging his repeated objections to all efforts to present the Zen experience as an intellectual system. However, even as he denounced philosophizing as a futile exercise, his books present a philosophic interpretation of Zen. (There is an obvious analogy to Freud: though the founder of psychoanalysis emphasized the role of the irrational throughout his writings, he was surely no irrationalist.) As a Zen Buddhist, Suzuki must have appreciated the paradox involved. In writing so many books attempting to explain Zen, he obviously violated one of Zen’s most fundamental assumptions; and, indeed, he sometimes described his numerous publications as “my sins.” Though steadfastly denying that he was a philosopher, his writings on Zen clearly offer a philosophic presentation of Zen.<sup>23</sup> Knowing his background, one should not be surprised by this philosophic bent. After all, his American mentor had been trained as a philosopher, while his close friend Nishida Kitarō ranks as Japan’s greatest twentieth-century philosopher. Significantly, many of Suzuki’s articles appeared in important philosophical journals such as *The Open Court*, *The Monist*, and *Philosophy East and West*.

The final years of Suzuki’s life from 1950 until his death in 1966 were years of astonishing activity and widening international fame. In addition to his high-profile lectures at Columbia University, he became a regular participant at the Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, which brought together some of the world’s most eminent scholars, theologians, and psychologists. He also took part in the Third and Fourth East-West Philosophers’ Conferences held in Hawai’i in 1959 and 1964 and in a 1957 conference on Zen and psychoanalysis organized by Erich Fromm in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In his eighties, he continued to publish new works almost yearly, including his *Studies in Zen* (1955), *Zen and Japanese Buddhism* (1958), *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (1957), and *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1960), the latter two revealing his desire to link Buddhist tradition and Western thought. Though perhaps a surprising choice for an elderly Japanese man in his eighties, during these later years New York City became his home away from home. Curiously for such a noisy and bustling center, one of the city’s attractions was that it provided a quiet refuge

where he could do his work; in Japan he was constantly besieged by a stream of visitors.

A full examination of Suzuki's amazingly prolific career as a writer and scholar would require many more pages than are available here. However, three generalizations concerning his Zen writings and their role as a source of the modern West's understanding of Zen stand out. First, though almost automatically identified with Zen, it is striking that he did not really begin to focus on Zen Buddhism until the 1927 appearance of the first volume of his *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, when he was already fifty-seven years old. (He did publish a brief, unnoticed piece on Zen in the 1906–1907 volume of the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*.) In the West at least the tendency has been to ignore his extensive non-Zen writings. In fact, nearly all of his early publications, including numerous contributions in *The Open Court* and *The Monist* and his first scholarly book, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, focused upon Mahayana Buddhism and Buddhism generally—not on Zen Buddhism. It may be that in his desire to reach a wider Western audience he found it best in the beginning to emphasize Buddhism's broad message rather than its sectarian differences. In later years he paid increasing attention to Jodo Shinshu or Shin Buddhism, an interest encouraged by his long association with Otani University, a Jodo Shinshu institution.<sup>24</sup> To put it differently, early and late Suzuki focused much attention on both Mahayana and Shin Buddhism; Zen Buddhism was never his sole interest.

Secondly, despite his Western reputation as a great scholar whose publications offer the authoritative presentation of Zen Buddhism, his writings clearly reveal a spirit of advocacy. Influenced by his teacher Shaku Soen as well as Meiji-era Buddhist thinking, he came to his studies of Buddhism not as a disinterested scholar, but as a believing Buddhist committed to the defense and exposition of the Buddha's way as a spiritual choice. Though he certainly deserves his reputation as a great scholar whose translations and scholarly publications continue to provide illumination, we must always remember that the ultimate goal of his scholarship was not knowledge for knowledge's sake, but the presentation of Buddhism and Zen Buddhism as religious choices. This stance may, of course, be viewed as positive, depending upon one's perspective. If his personal Buddhist commitments may be cited by critics as a distorting influence, the fact that he was a practicing Buddhist would only have increased the authority of his writings for others.

Thirdly, it is clear that much of Suzuki's success in the West stemmed from his ability to simplify Zen for a general audience. In

the best sense of the word, he was a popularizer. In his writings he regularly passed over complexities, eliminated technical terms, and offered well-chosen stories to make his points. By largely ignoring the differences in the historical forms of Buddhism while emphasizing its core teaching, he made it much easier for Westerners to understand and embrace the Buddhist message. And by blurring the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism and between the Ch'an Buddhism of China and the Zen Buddhism of Japan, he also made Buddhism seem much more unified and more universal than the facts justified.

In concluding, we may turn finally to the contemporary scholarly evaluation of Suzuki's published works on Zen Buddhism. Hailed by a generation of Western readers as the world's greatest authority, what are contemporary scholars saying? The answer seems to be that, while his works are still frequently cited, his interpretation of Zen has come under severe attack. While the intensity of this criticism has greatly increased in recent years, it should be noted that the questioning goes back at least to the 1950s. One of the earliest critics, Chinese historian Hu Shih charged in 1953 that by ignoring Zen's historical roots, Suzuki was greatly distorting its lineage and teachings. Objecting to Suzuki's contention in the second volume of his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* that Zen was "above space-time relations" and "even above historical facts," Hu Shih insisted on the importance of recognizing Zen's roots in the Ch'an Buddhism of China. Obviously stung by Hu Shih's attack, Suzuki responded with uncharacteristic harshness that Zen needed to be "understood from the inside" rather than from the outside as in Hu Shih's approach.<sup>25</sup> In the 1960s other critics, led by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Ernst Benz, complained that Suzuki's writings were diluting and psychologizing Zen's teachings, encouraging a widespread misunderstanding among Westerners.<sup>26</sup>

The criticisms have greatly increased since the 1980s as a revisionist view has become dominant. The emerging consensus seems to be that the Zen Buddhism that D. T. Suzuki presented in his many books represents a modern, Western-influenced Zen that broke sharply with the traditional Zen of Japan. Presenting arguments too complex to summarize here, the two leaders in this reevaluation, Bernard Faure and Robert Sharf, have produced meticulously documented critiques that argue that the Japanese Zennist has, in effect, reconceptualized Zen, greatly distorting its traditional teachings. In his *Chan Insights and Oversights*, Faure suggests that, like his close friend Nishida Kitarō, Suzuki had both adopted and reversed Western Orientalist assumptions. In their description of Zen they had effectively "inverted" the

image created by earlier Christian missionaries, replacing the hostile Christian view by an idealized image of Japanese culture and Zen. Insisting that the importance of Suzuki's work has been greatly exaggerated, Faure attacks Suzuki's Rinzai sectarianism, his tendency to emphasize mysticism as a common foundation for Zen and Christianity, and his nativist tendencies. Faure concludes that Suzuki's interpretation was very much colored by his isolation from his own people and marginality in Japanese culture. Leaving Japan for the United States as a young man, his thought revealed "his confrontation with Western values," including Christianity, psychoanalysis, and existentialism—all of which had profoundly distorted his Zen view.<sup>27</sup>

In his important essay, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," published in the *History of Religions* in the same year as Faure's *Chan Buddhism*, Robert Sharf added his voice to those critical of Suzuki's reinterpretation of Zen. Beginning with the influence of Meiji-era Buddhism, Sharf documents the degree to which Suzuki's view of Zen was transformed by his personal experiences. The most important influences were his early years in the United States, the influence of the Western conception of "direct" experience through William James, and his attraction to nativist and *nihonjinron* ideas of Japanese "innate spirituality." Like Faure, Sharf concludes that the common feature of "virtually all" Japanese writers responsible for the modern Western interest in Zen, and certainly Suzuki, was their "relatively marginal status within the Japanese Zen establishment."<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the criticisms have now gone far enough, with a need to strike a better balance. While the findings of scholars such as Faure and Sharf unquestionably demonstrate how much the Japanese scholar reinterpreted traditional Zen teachings, they do not diminish Suzuki's immense importance as a transmitter of Zen and Asian thought to the West. Indeed, his very success in recasting Zen Buddhism as a modern, universal, yet quintessential expression of Japanese culture made it possible for Zen to reach Western intellectuals and seekers who would not otherwise have found such an exotic tradition attractive. Clearly, as many have noted, Buddhism must become an American Buddhism to put down roots, and the same is true for Zen Buddhism. Through the centuries the adherents in all religious traditions have frequently disagreed concerning the permissible limits in the adaptation of the core teaching to new conditions. The tension between past and present, between tradition and change have been present always. For most Americans, traditional Japanese Zen, or even the Meiji-era Zen that sought to adapt itself to modern conditions, would have seemed too foreign for acceptance. In the future, Suzuki's historical

reputation will rest less on the “correctness” of his interpretation of Zen than on his critical role as its transmitter to the West. In the midst of a needed reevaluation of his role as an interpreter of Zen, we should not lose sight of his extraordinary contributions as an influence in introducing Americans and the West to Zen Buddhism.

## Notes

1. Lynn White, Jr., ed., *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man* (New York: Harper, 1956), 304–05; Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially chap. 2, “The Rise of Zen Orientalism”; and Robert Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” *History of Religions* 33 (August 1993): 1–43.

2. Daisetz T. Suzuki, “Early Memories,” *The Middle Way* 39 (November 1964): 101–08. Quote on p.103. In a long career as a writer that began in his twenties and extended into his nineties, the Japanese scholar rarely spoke of his own life. For other biographical sources, see the Suzuki Memorial Issue, published after his death in *The Eastern Buddhist*, N.S., 2 (August 1967), which includes memories and testimonials by friends and associates. Masao Abe, ed., *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986) reprints eight pieces from the memorial issue, along with additional contributions including Suzuki’s “An Autobiographical Account” on pp. 13–26. Biographical materials in Japanese are included in the ongoing multivolume *Suzuki Daisetz Zenshu (The Complete Works of D. T. Suzuki)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968–). Also see Margaret H. Dornish’s dissertation, “Joshū’s Bridge: D. T. Suzuki’s Message and Mission. The Early Years, 1897–1927” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1969), which remains helpful, and A. Irwin Switzer’s brief sketch, *D. T. Suzuki: A Biography*, ed. John Snelling (London: The Buddhist Society, 1985).

3. Suzuki, “Early Memories,” 101.

4. See Shokin Furuta, “Shaku Soen: The Footsteps of a Modern Japanese Zen Master,” *Philosophical Studies of Japan* 8 (1967): 67–91.

5. See James E. Ketelaar’s excellent *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

6. Suzuki, “Early Memories,” 107. He describes his spiritual struggles during this period on pp. 105–08.

7. For the role of Asian delegates at the Parliament, see chap. 13, “The Parliament of Religions: The Closing of One Era and the Opening of Another,” in Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 243–61 and Richard H. Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). Also see Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism,*

and the Columbian Exposition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), which provides a more detailed analysis of the Japanese Buddhist participation at the Parliament.

8. Quoted in Larry A. Fader, "The Philosophically Significant Western Understandings of D. T. Suzuki's Interpretation of Zen and Their Influence on Occidental Culture Examined Critically in Relation to Suzuki's Thought as Contained in his English-Language Writings" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1976), 37. Fader's dissertation remains useful. For Suzuki's account of his association with Carus, see his "A Glimpse of Paul Carus," in Joseph Kitagawa, ed., *Modern Trends in World Religions—Paul Carus Memorial Symposium* (La Salle: Open Court Press, 1959), ix–xiv. Harold Henderson questions Suzuki's recollection that he had originally come to the United States at Carus's invitation, arguing that in fact he came at his own request with the desire to study philosophy with Carus. See Henderson, *Catalyst for Controversy: Paul Carus of Open Court* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1993), 101.

9. For this formative period in Suzuki's life, see Suzuki, "Early Memories," 101–08 and Shojun Bando, "D. T. Suzuki's Early Life in La Salle," *The Eastern Buddhist* N.S., 2 (August 1967): 137–46.

10. For a more detailed examination of Carus's interest in Asian thought and association with Suzuki, see the author's "The Meeting of East and West: The Case of Paul Carus," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29 (January–March 1968): 73–92.

11. See D. T. Suzuki, "Confucius," *The Open Court* 13 (November 1899): 644–49; "The Breadth of Buddhism," *The Open Court* 14 (January 1900): 51–53; "Acavghosha, the First Advocate of the Mahayana Buddhism," *The Monist* 10 (January 1900): 216–45; "The First Buddhist Council," *The Monist* 14 (January 1904): 253–82; and "A Brief History of Early Chinese Philosophy," *The Monist* 17 (July 1907): 415–50, continued in *ibid.*, 18 (April 1908): 242–85 and *ibid.* 18 (October 1908): 481–509.

12. Indeed, Suzuki's original intention was to publish two magazines with exactly the same difference in emphasis as Carus's, one a monthly "to be devoted to a popular exposition of Buddhism" and the other, a quarterly, "in which more scholarly articles" would be published. See Editorial, *The Eastern Buddhist* 11 (January–February, March–April 1922): 387.

13. For Suzuki's involvement with Swedenborg, see Andrew Bernstein's introduction to D. T. Suzuki, *Swedenborg: Buddha of the North* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1996), 5–12. The volume provides a translation of Suzuki's *Swedenborugu* and other Swedenborgian writings from the Japanese, as well as several essays analyzing his indebtedness to Swedenborgianism.

14. For a listing of his most important book and pamphlet publications, see the bibliography in Masao Abe, *A Zen Life*, 235–46.

15. See Christmas Humphreys, "Buddhism in England 1920–1980: A Personal Study in Dharma," *The Middle Way* 55 (February 1981): 153–64 and *Both Sides of the Circle: The Autobiography of Christmas Humphreys* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978).

16. Cited in Brian A. Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997), 106, a key work. For an excellent collection of essays that addresses the issue with reference to the Kyoto School, see James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994). Also see Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," and Graham Parkes's "The Putative Fascism of the Kyoto School and the Political Correctness of the Modern Academy," *Philosophy East and West* 47 (July 1997): 305–36.

17. See Kirita Kiyohide, "D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State," in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 52–74 and Christopher Ives, "Protect the Dharma, Protect the Country: Buddhist War Responsibility and Social Ethics," *The Eastern Buddhist N.S.*, 33:2 (2001): 15–34.

18. See Winthrop Sargeant's charming portrait, "Great Simplicity," *The New Yorker* 33 (August 31, 1957): 34–36ff. Quote on p. 36.

19. William Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956) and Bernard Phillips, ed., *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism: An Anthology of the Writings of Daisetz T. Suzuki* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962).

20. D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 33, 44.

21. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism. First Series* (London: Luzac, 1927), 303.

22. D. T. Suzuki, "The Philosophy of Zen," *Philosophy East and West* 1 (July 1951): 14.

23. On this point, see Hiroshi Sakamoto, "D. T. Suzuki as a Philosopher," *The Eastern Buddhist N.S.*, 11 (Oct. 1978): 33–42, who argues that though "not a philosopher" in the formal sense, Suzuki developed a distinctive "system of philosophy of his own."

24. See his *Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism* (Kyoto: Shinshu Otaniha, 1973). Galen Amstutz discusses Suzuki's Shin interests in "Modern Cultural Nationalism and English Writing on Buddhism: The Case of D. T. Suzuki and Shin Buddhism," *Japanese Religions* 22 (July 1997): 65–86.

25. See Hu Shih, "Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in China: Its History and Method," *Philosophy East and West* 3 (April 1953): 3–24 and D. T. Suzuki, "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih," *ibid.*, 25–46. Quote on p. 26. The reverberations caused by Hu Shih's article continued for years after, with Arthur Waley proposing a middle position in "History and Religion," *Philosophy East and West* 5 (April 1955): 75–78. James D. Sellmann revisited the controversy as recently as 1995 in his "A Belated Response to Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki," *Philosophy East and West* 45 (January 1995): 97–104.

26. See R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Some Observations on Recent Studies of Zen," in E. E. Urbach et al., eds., *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 317–35 and the review of Benz's book *Zen in Westlicher Sicht* in *The Eastern Buddhist N.S.*, 1 (September 1965): 126.

27. See chap. 2, "The Rise of Zen Orientalism," in Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, especially pp. 52–74. Quotes on pp. 53 and 63.

28. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 1–43. Quote on p. 40. The article was reprinted in revised form in Donald S. Lopez's excellent collection, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Also see Sharf's follow-up piece, "Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited," in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 40–51.