

D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State

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BUDDHISM, AS THE OLD ZEN saying has it, spreads toward the east (仏教東漸). D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) was the first Japanese to spend a significant part of his life working to bring this about, as he traveled eastward from the Japanese islands to the nations of North America and Europe propagating the teachings of Buddhism. He was also a tireless exponent of the Zen and Pure Land traditions at home in Japan.

Suzuki produced an enormous body of writings in the eight decades between his fifteenth year and his death at ninety-five—approximately thirty volumes in English and one hundred volumes in Japanese. However, except for a few biographical works and commentaries by people who knew him personally, very little evaluation of the man or his work has been carried out in Japan. Even the basic materials necessary for serious research on Suzuki are not yet fully available. In the few years I myself have devoted to tracking down his articles in newspapers and journals, I have uncovered literally scores of pieces that were overlooked in the compilation of his *Collected Works*. The records of his unpublished letters and talks are sketchier still.

In this paper I will examine Suzuki's writings, including material that did not find its way into the *Collected Works*, in an attempt to clarify his attitudes towards the state and society. This will, of course, extend to the question of nationalism in Suzuki's thought and to his ideas about Zen, war, the Japanese, and national polity.

YOUTHFUL VIEWS ON THE STATE AND SOCIETY

Suzuki's first book, *A New Theory of Religion*, was published when he was twenty-six years old, just prior to his departure for the United States. In it he discussed his ideas on the relationship between religion and the state. He opens with an exposition of a modern, Enlightenment view of religion:

Religion sees its ultimate purpose as the realization of a cosmic ideal; the state sees as its ultimate purpose the preservation of its own existence.... Religion professes universal brotherhood and enjoins against making any distinction between self and other; the state is based on the principles of loyalty and patriotic sentiment, and exhorts its citizens to independence. Religion never hesitates to question the existence of the state and history; the state always acts on the basis of its own self-centered interests. In this way, religion and the state are incompatible.¹

He goes on to argue that “the state must constitute a furtherance of social progress. It must, in other words, serve as a means to help humanity bring to realization the purpose of its existence.”² And again:

Formation of the state is not the purpose of human existence but merely an expedient means, nothing more than a single stage that must be passed by humanity in the course of its development. Humanity exists for the sake of humanity, not for the sake of the state.... In order that the existence of the state does not hinder the realization of the hopes and ideals of religion, that is, of humanity, the state must, I believe, be reformed when necessary.³

Thus in Suzuki’s view the state does not exist as an end in itself but merely as an instrument, a means to promote human interests. It is a view predicated upon the existence of a modern civil society, and might best be characterized as a libertarian *Nachtwächterstaat*. At the same time, he was aware that the idea did not reflect the actual condition of a state in which “loyalty and patriotism are the basic principles” and which “sees its final purpose in the preservation of its own existence.” Against this conflict of the ideal and the actual, 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 order to “work for the progress and development of the nation.”⁴

Thus, while realizing that religion and the state differ in principle and are incompatible in many respects, he strikes a compromise relationship that keeps their respective roles separate but clearly places the state under the guidance of religion:

The interests of religion and the state do not conflict but rather aid and support each other in a quest for wholeness.... The problem is easily resolved if one thinks of religion as an entity with the state as its body,

¹ 新宗教論 (1896), SDZ 23:134.

² SDZ 23:137.

³ SDZ 23:136.

⁴ SDZ 23:137.

and of the state as something developing with religion as its spirit. In other words, religion and the state form a unity; if every action and movement of the state takes on a religious character and if every word and action of religion takes on a state character, then whatever is done for the sake of the state is done for religion, and whatever is done for the sake of religion is done for the state.⁵

All of this does not quite offset the impact of his initial statement that religion ought “first of all to try to support the state,” which seems to lead to an acceptance of state supremacy. His rather “Zen-like” approach to religion and his abstract notion of the way nations operate seem far too unrealistic. These criticisms, though not entirely on the mark, have some truth to them and deserve closer attention.

Suzuki was much clearer in his views on the state and society following his move to the United States in the late 1890s. His position was basically critical of the current Japanese governmental structure (including the role of the imperial family) and of those who supported it: the Meiji political and bureaucratic establishment, the ultranationalists, and the various proponents of Japanism. We find his views on the imperial family expressed, for example, in magazine articles critical of the ultranationalists, whom he characterized as follows:

They say, “Obey the rescripts on the Imperial Restoration,” “Study the *Imperial Rescript on Education*,” “Display a nation-building spirit,” “Honor the ancestors of the country.” All of this is fine. But while these people on the one hand proclaim reason as their supreme sword and shield and talk on and on about the results of nineteenth-century historical research, on the other hand they manipulate the weaknesses of the Japanese people, embracing the imperial family and the imperial rescripts and attempting to imbue them with a religious significance. The hypocrisy of it all is quite overwhelming....

Let us stop pretending that the Japanese are a great people merely because their imperial family has continued unbroken for the past 2,500 years.⁶

In his personal correspondence Suzuki expressed his feelings even more frankly.

I believe that it contributes nothing to progress if the imperial family dreams on about its former transcendence and mystery, and if the people

⁵ SDZ 23:139.

⁶ 旅のつれづれ [Random thoughts while traveling], 六合雑誌 20 (25 June 1898): 70–2. Full references are given only to those of Suzuki’s writings not included in the *Collected Works*.

view its statements as august beyond compare. Whenever anything untoward happens the government attempts to hide behind such attitudes and to seal the mouths of the people. What is more, the road to free thought is cut off and the people must obey without hesitation those who exalt the imperial family and take refuge behind the imperial proclamations. What an unfortunate situation. [In the margin: *You must never make these words public. I must wait for the right time*].... What a shame how people stand in awe of things like the *Imperial Rescript on Education*. I had better not say too much. And what do you think?⁷

Such opinions were expressed on several occasions in letters to his close friend Yamamoto Ryōkichi. The earliest such statement was in 1888 when Suzuki was eighteen years old:

The emperor's birthday celebration the other day was a huge affair. Why is it necessary to make such a fuss? The people involved are a frivolous bunch. I think the whole thing is completely unnecessary. What about you?⁸

This statement may be read as a kind of frustrated “cry in the wilderness” by a gifted young man stuck in the remote countryside of the Noto Peninsula, but it more or less reflects Suzuki's attitude toward the imperial family until at least the end of the Meiji period. He saw the existence of the imperial family as not only violating the equality of the people but also as providing the ultranationalists with a pretext both for their Japanist mystique and their dangerous, backward-looking traditionalism, as well as for their attempts to stifle the freedom of speech and thought. Suzuki therefore regarded the imperial family as a hindrance to the modernization of the country and to the realization of his ideal of a state and society unified under the guidance of religion.

This naturally raises the question of how Suzuki envisaged the workings of the state. We want to ask, for example, what he means when he says that the state “must...serve as a means to help humanity bring to realization the purpose of its existence.” In fact, Suzuki takes up the question of society in a number of his writings, including many of his contributions to the journals *Rikugō zasshi* (六合雜誌, *Universum*) and *Shin Bukkyō* (新仏教, *New Buddhism*) while he was in America. His idea, briefly put, was that “the ideal society provide a structure within which individuals can cultivate their respective strengths as they want.” He explains this in further detail:

⁷ Letter no. 48, 14 June 1898, 鈴木大拙未公開書簡 [Unpublished letters of D. T. Suzuki], ed. by Zen Bunka Kenkyūjo (Kyoto: Zen Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1989). Not in SDZ.

⁸ Letter No. 7 (13 November 1888), *Unpublished Letters*.

The greatest possible motivation we can have for organizing our society is the chance to develop our natural abilities freely and apply them toward the advance of society as a whole. For this to come about, all individuals must be provided with equal opportunities and circumstances. The most important factor here is to reduce to an absolute minimum the gap between rich and poor. If the obstacles of food, shelter, and clothing were removed and people were free to cultivate their innate talents and moral nature, to devote themselves entirely to the advance of society as a whole, the progress of culture would be truly amazing.⁹

Suzuki kept his distance from the socialists, but he did acknowledge the views of contemporaries sympathetic with this way of thinking. “Recently I have been studying socialism,” he wrote, “and I am in sympathy with ideas like social justice and equality of opportunity. Present society (particularly as it is in Japan) must be reformed from the ground up.”¹⁰ In the opening paragraph of the article in which the remarks cited above appears, he expressed approval of socialism:

It is said that the government has forbidden the formation of the Social Democratic Party. I deeply regret the Japanese government’s irresponsibility and lack of farsightedness, and its inattentiveness to social progress and human happiness.

Suzuki studied socialist thought in the pages of journals like *Universum*, even as he saw all about him the problems that youthful, vigorous America was facing in its capitalist society. Already by this time his social consciousness as an independent Buddhist reformer had developed enough for him to write:

When we look for reasons for the plight of the impoverished in today’s society, we see that their poverty is due not so much to any fault of their own as to the defects of the social system and the maldistribution of wealth.... One can hardly expect impoverished people in such difficult circumstances to be satisfied with spiritual comfort bereft of any material aid.... My earnest desire is that Buddhists do not remain satisfied with personal peace and enlightenment but take it upon themselves to help society.¹¹

⁹ 社会民主的党の結党禁止につきて(社会主義の宗教的基礎) [On the prohibition of the formation of the Social Democratic Party: The religious foundations of socialism], 六合雑誌 249 (15 September 1901): 45.

¹⁰ Letter No. 50 (6 January 1901), *Unpublished Letters*.

¹¹ SDZ 28:422–3.

FROM THE RETURN TO JAPAN AND UNTIL THE END OF THE WAR

In 1909 Suzuki, then thirty-eight and having spent the last twelve years in the United States and Europe, returned to Japan and took up employment at the Gakushū-in Tokyo. The Gakushū-in was a special boarding school attended by the sons and daughters of the very royalty and nobility that Suzuki had earlier criticized. He was eager to fulfill his duties as an English teacher and housemaster. His life as a teacher under the leadership of Nogi Maresuke, a typical career soldier of the “loyalty-and-patriotism” school, and a representative of the “good old” Meiji era, must have been rather awkward.¹² Suzuki’s own philosophy of education was based on respect for the individual and aimed at nurturing independence and spontaneity. For him, the twentieth century was an age of world-historical significance that could only require serious change in society. Even in Japan

it is impossible to say what will become of the aristocratic class. The day may come when it is no longer necessary to maintain the privileged class in order to preserve the nation. I do not think it desirable to have a system where a wall of privilege exists between the imperial family and the common people, separating the two. There should be only the imperial family and the common people. Perhaps the day will come when this becomes a reality.

Turning his remarks directly to the students, Suzuki exhorted them to develop their natural abilities and not to rely on privileges of birth or inheritance:

Most of you are children of the nobility. You form a special class in Japan and receive privileged treatment from the imperial family. You must remember that wherever special favor is shown, special responsibility is also demanded....

Natural ability means not claiming for your own that which does not belong to you and not entrusting yourself to good fortune. It is, in a sense, individualism. The only way to develop your natural abilities is to make full use of your independence and freedom....¹³

And again elsewhere:

Individualism is not selfishness; it means to become one’s own master. From the standpoint of ethics, this is something lacking in young

¹² Nogi Maresuke committed ritual suicide on 13 September 1912, following the death of Emperor Meiji on 30 July 1912. The incident evoked great public interest. Arguing that it was not up to others to judge Nogi’s actions, Suzuki distanced himself from the incident, writing that “those who imitate him are fools. Each person should act on their own.” SDZ 17:50–2.

¹³ SDZ 28:224, 226.

people today. Of course, individualism has dangers as well, but one should not disregard its merits. As for me, I will cling to its merits.¹⁴

Suzuki wrote nine essays for the *Hojinkai zasshi* (輔仁會雜誌), a publication of the Gakushū-in, under the personal name of Teitarō, not Daisetsu. In these essays he stressed again and again the importance of an “enterprising spirit” and “self-reliance” based on autonomy, independence, and freedom.¹⁵ Many of his pupils attest that as housemaster and as English teacher Suzuki treated everyone, students and faculty members alike, without favor, sharing his inimitable personality and exerting a strong influence on all around him.¹⁶

Suzuki’s writings from the end of the Meiji era through the Taishō era appeared chiefly in the two monthlies *Shin Bukkyō* and *Zendō* (禪道, *Zen Way*), but also in the *Hojinkai zasshi* and the Buddhist newspaper *Chūgai nippō* (中外日報). *Shin Bukkyō* was a Pure Land Buddhist journal promoting the reform of Meiji Buddhism. From its inception in 1900 until its termination in 1915, it ran some sixty articles by Suzuki, mainly pieces of social commentary. *Zendō* was a Zen monthly that Suzuki served as editor-in-chief. He published some fifty articles on Zen in its pages, beginning with the monthly’s first issue in August 1910. One notes a clear difference in his approach to the two publications. In the articles for *Shin Bukkyō*, Suzuki makes little reference to Buddhism but focuses rather on a comparison of Eastern and Western civilization, culture, and society, as well as religion, morality, customs, and manners. Allusions to the state are not as frequent as in writings composed when he was living in the United States. With the demise of *Shin Bukkyō*, Suzuki’s social commentary decreased and the bulk of his lectures and essays, apart from those of his publications that appeared in the various scholarly journals of Ōtani University, appeared in *Shindō* (信道, *The Way of Belief*), a popular magazine published under Pure Land Buddhist auspices. His contributions to *Shindō* dealt with Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, and included some social commentary. Other articles on Zen appeared occasionally in *Daijōzen* (大乘禪, *Mahāyāna Zen*), a monthly founded in 1924, the year

¹⁴ SDZ 28:44.

¹⁵ SDZ 28:44, 47, etc. The name of the journal literally means *Journal of the Society for the Promotion of Humanness*, the two characters for this final phrase (輔仁) being an allusion to the closing words of the twelfth book of the *Analects* of Confucius.

¹⁶ 松方三郎 Matsukata Saburō, 学習院時代の鈴木先生 [Dr. Suzuki’s Gakushū-in period], in 鈴木大拙の人と学問 [Suzuki Daisetsu, the man and his scholarship] (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1961), 63–74. 犬養 健 Inukai Takeru, 鈴木大拙居士—その絶対的他力論について [Layman Suzuki Daisetsu’s theory of absolute Other-power], in *Suzuki Daisetsu, The Man and His Scholarship*, 75–85. 日高第四郎 Hidaka Daishirō, 乃木大将と鈴木大拙先生の印象及び思い出 [Memories and impressions of General Nogi and Suzuki Daisetsu] in 鈴木大拙一人と思想 [Suzuki Daisetsu: The man and his thought] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971), 279–88.

after *Zendō* ceased publication, and in *Shōbōrin* (正法論, *The True Wheel of the Dharma*).

During his twelve years at the Gakushū-in, in addition to numerous essays on Zen and social problems, he also wrote pieces for the edification of his students with titles such as “A Missive to the Children of the Noble and Wealthy” and “On Poverty.” The same dedication he had shown there he took with him to Ōtani University, where he taught from 1921 until after the end of the Pacific War.¹⁷

From the early years of the Shōwa period (1925–1989), Suzuki became interested in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and subsequently in the *Platform Sūtra*, the Tun-huang manuscripts, the writings of Zen masters Lin-chi and Bankei, and Pure Land Buddhism. The period beginning from shortly after his transfer to Ōtani University in 1921 until the end of the war in 1945 was the time in Suzuki’s long life when he concentrated the most on the study of Buddhism. It was also the period in which he established his reputation as a scholar. During this time he published several works in English including the three volumes of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927–1934), *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (1930), which became the core of his doctoral dissertation, and *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (1938). Among his publications in Japanese were his major works on Zen Buddhism such as *The Records of Shen-hui Discovered at Tun-huang* (1932), *Sanskrit-Chinese Index to the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (1934), *The Unborn Zen of Bankei* (1940), *Studies in the History of Zen Thought: I* (1943), *Zen Thought* (1943), and such representative writings on Pure Land Buddhism as *Detachment* (1939), *Treatise on the Logic of Pure Land Thought* (1942), and *The Fact of Religious Experience* (1943).

During the war years his only non-Buddhist writings were on the subject of Japanese culture, among them a volume later translated into English as *Japanese Spirituality*,¹⁸ and his essays on the Japanese people. *Japanese Spirituality* is an attempt to find a unique Japanese spirituality in Buddhism, especially its Pure Land and True Pure Land sects. Suzuki’s writings on the Japanese people discuss their special characteristics in comparison with western Europeans, the Japanese understanding of history, and the Japanese view of death. Although these writings deal specifically with Japan, his intention was not only to encourage his fellow Japanese during the devastating years of the war, but also to discover and demonstrate a Buddhist spirituality that could be appreciated by all humanity. In none of his essays does he praise the superiority of the Japanese people. The following passage is typical of his style:

¹⁷ See SDZ 17:80–99; 19:307–76; 28:359–61; 29:50–65, etc.

¹⁸ SDZ 8:1–223. English translation by Norman Waddell, *Japanese Spirituality* (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, 1972).

The Japanese are highly sentimental and lacking in logic, have difficulty in forming an independent judgment on the right and wrong of things, are only concerned about being ridiculed by others, and are reluctant to enter into unknown and unexplored areas, and if they should dare to do so, they do it recklessly and without any plans made in advance.¹⁹

Suzuki further claims that this sentimentality lay behind the “human torpedoes” and “kamikaze squadrons,” but at once questions how the sacrifice of human life in an attempt to make up for the shortage of mechanical equipment and the inadequacy of scientific technology could ever be considered a noble cause.²⁰ This was also a criticism of the military establishment.

Such statements are products of the times in which they were made, a period when a narrow-minded, self-righteous “Japanese spirit” centered on Hirata Shinto (平田神道) was being propagated throughout the country. I would add that Suzuki’s essays on the culture and people of Japan represent his personal criticism of and resistance to the understanding of the Japanese spirit circulating at the time. The year after the publication of *Japanese Spirituality*, just prior to the end of the war, he prepared a lecture on “A Japanese Spiritual Awakening” (日本の靈性的自覚) to be delivered at Ōtani University, a draft of which still exists. In it he explains the term *spirituality* and presents a critique of the idea of *Japanese spirit*:

The term *Japanese spirit* used by our colleagues nowadays includes elements of special political characteristics, patriotic zeal, historical reminiscing, moral self-respect, and peculiarities of aesthetic appreciation. In addition, the term also emphasizes an exclusive narrow-mindedness and the conservative characteristics of an insular, anti-cosmopolitan people.... This is because our conception of Japan has become so subjective that it has psychologically, logically, philosophically, and historically distorted our way of thinking. Once begun, the distortion grows without bounds, turning into something grotesque.²¹

The military establishment and State Shinto were not alone in championing this *yamato-damashii* (大和魂) or spirit of Japanese uniqueness. Many Zen Buddhists expressed similar views. For example, during this period one of the journals Suzuki contributed to frequently, *Daijōzen*, fairly bristled with pro-militarist articles. In issues filled with essays proclaiming “Victory in the Holy War!” and bearing such titles as “Death is the Last Battle,” “Certain Victory for Kamikaze and Torpedoes,” and “The Noble Sacrifice of a

¹⁹ SDZ 21:179.

²⁰ SDZ 21:194.

²¹ SDZ 9:150–203; citation on 156.

Hundred Million,” Suzuki continued with contributions on subjects like “Zen and Culture.”²²

A further indication of his posture during the war years is his work for the Buddhist newspaper *Chūgai nippō*. Between 1941 and the end of the war in 1945 Suzuki contributed two regular articles and 191 short installments for a column entitled “Zen.” Virtually none of these pieces contain any reference made to the current political and war situation.²³ Instead, they simply introduce the lives and recorded sayings of the masters or explain the outlook of Zen. He did, however, occasionally lapse into lines like the following:

Some people think that to die recklessly is Zen. But Zen and death are not the same thing. *Makujikikōzen* (慕直向前) does not mean to sit in the grip of the hand of death. It is deplorable to think of Zen as a purification rite. The Zen understanding of human life is based on Mahāyāna Buddhism. Zen without this is not Zen. It isn’t anything at all.... To regard the foolhardy and senseless sacrifice of one’s life as Zen is a mish-mash idea. Zen absolutely never teaches one to throw one’s life away.²⁴

Passages such as these make plain Suzuki’s resistance to movements trying to associate Zen with war and death. They are also a clear criticism of Shinto. The circumstances at the time he was writing may be gathered from the words of the *Chūgai nippō*’s president, who commented in his “Editor’s Diary” column that

Daisetsu Suzuki’s light-hearted, childlike nature is itself the everyday expression of Zen, yet within his eloquent words one finds statements—almost digressions—that to the ordinary way of thinking can be seen as quite dangerous.²⁵

Suzuki, who had lived in the United States for over ten years, was well aware of its strength and foresaw the defeat of Japan. He was also aware of the ideological vacuity of the Shinto concepts of national polity and the government’s pronouncements on the Greater East Asia Coprosperity Sphere. He had never been a government official and in general remained a lone wolf where connections with large organizations was concerned. He was a private citizen with no links to the military establishment. When the war broke out, he was over seventy years of age. He lived alone and in relative independence.

²² 大乘禪 21/7 (1 July 1944), et alibi.

²³ See SDZ 15:157–425.

²⁴ SDZ 15:222.

²⁵ 中外日報 (30 November 1943).

Under these circumstances Suzuki, in addition to his work on Zen and Shin Buddhism, appears to have devoted considerable thought to the question of what could be done to help rebuild Japan after the fighting was over. Many of his activities at this time—his writing of *Japanese Spirituality* and “The Global Mission of Mahāyāna,” his lecturing, his collecting of volumes for the Matsugaoka Library—were directed towards protecting and later disseminating the “jewel of Japan,” Zen. Under the limits of the strict censorship in force at the time, he had to restrict his critical remarks about militarism and “the national polity” to a few letters written to close friends.²⁶ Only an occasional touch of irony appeared in his writings, as in the following:

There is a swarm of people all around eager to commit suicide with the past, to embrace what is Japanese, no matter how limited geographically it is, and defend it to the last.... We must go beyond such limited terms as “Greater East Asia” and find more expansive terms like *tenjō tenge* (天上天下, heaven and earth).²⁷

However, he did not take a firm stance against the war or write essays criticizing the military or Shinto nationalists head-on. What is clear, in any case, is the fact that he disliked the reckless manner, self-righteousness, and parochialism of the military and its idea of “national polity,” and that he did not go along with the mood of the times.

THE YEARS AFTER THE WAR

Following the end of the war Suzuki turned his thoughts to the creation of what he called a “spiritual Japan.” In the three-year period immediately after Japan’s surrender he wrote numerous articles on this topic as well as over ten books: *A Japanese Spiritual Awakening*, *The Building of a Spiritual Japan*, *Self-reliance*, *The Spiritualizing of Japan*, *Religion and the Modern Person*, *Religion and Culture*, *To the Young*, and *East and West*. All of these works described the construction of a new Japan based on the principles of Buddhist spirituality, and all of them rejected the wartime notions of national polity, the Japanese spirit, State Shinto, military dictatorship, and military support by the Buddhists.

²⁶ For example, in a letter dated 17 March 1945, he wrote, “Without people, without things, without tools, without machines, and even without any ideas, nothing at all can be done; and then with the helplessness of the authorities and the ignorance of the army and civil servants, the situation is hopeless” (SDZ 31:343). On 6 July 1945 he wrote, “Those responsible for the ruin of Japan are the intolerant *kokugakusha* [nativists], the Shintoists. It is a shame that everything has been dominated by them” (31:358). See also SDZ 31:295, 348, 350, etc.

²⁷ SDZ 29:58.

The basis of Suzuki's criticism of the old order and the construction of the new Japan was the "spirituality" principle. In one of his essays he summarized in three points what he called "the fundamental concepts for building a new Japan" that were to link "spirituality" with the nation state. First, and above all, Japan must think independently. But this independent thinking, secondly, must have a cosmopolitan character. Finally, Japan's actions must be based on humanitarianism.²⁸

Granted that there were strict controls over information during the war years, many Japanese swallowed the pronouncements of the military hook, line, and sinker. In this way a narrow-minded Hirata State Shinto came to be set up that professed Japan as the progenitor of all nations, the imperial dynasty as the ruler of all nations, and Shinto as the religion of the world. Suzuki considered the Japanese narrow-mindedness and lack of independence to be a defect of the race, and found it natural that the old Japan should have collapsed. He believed that a new spirituality was needed to construct a new Japan. The three points of this spirituality may be considered Suzuki's basic position on society, the state, and the world. During this period of his life he constantly stressed the notions of independent thinking and cosmopolitanism,²⁹ notions that we find expressed already from his youth and through the years of the war.

In the postwar period, as international relations came to be dominated by the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, Suzuki went beyond his criticism of Japanese national supremacy and militarism to consider ways to counter what might be called "nation-centeredness." While voices of doom were predicting the outbreak of World War Three, Suzuki was moved to face the question of the inevitability of war.³⁰ While recognizing that warfare was probably an inevitable part of human history, his proposal for limiting it to the greatest possible extent was to suppress all ideologies that give absolute authority to the state. These include state nationalism (国家主権), state supremacy (国家至上権), and the idea of national polity (国体観念). His opposition to such concepts was based, first, on his conviction that all such nationalistic sentiments have at their root a belief in the supremacy of force, the belief that "might makes right." "As long as force is used to suppress force," Suzuki comments, "we will never be without war." Second, he believed that all forms of totalitarianism—in particular Communism and Nazism—deprive people of their freedom, autonomy, and dignity and hinder their spiritual awakening. Though it may only have been an

²⁸ SDZ 21:162–68.

²⁹ SDZ 30:31–8, 50–7, 395–402, etc.; 21:96–106.

³⁰ SDZ 9:401–22.

idea never destined to be realized, Suzuki envisaged a world that would be rooted in “spiritual awakening” and a “world government” that would relativize the state.

Another facet of Suzuki’s political and cultural thought—idealistic as always, but based on a sound knowledge of political realities—comes to light several years after the war. In October 1952 the journal *Sekai* (世界, *The World*) conducted a survey on rearmament published in a special issue devoted to “The General Election: Opinions, Criticisms, Hopes.” It was a time when the situation in Japan was vastly different from what it had been immediately after the war, principally because of the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, and the end of the Occupation in 1952. Suzuki’s response to the questionnaire shows a tone somewhat different from many of his earlier pronouncements but gives a good indication of the viewpoint he held from that point on:

I consider rearmament unavoidable.... If we do not at this time undertake some form of armament, Japan as a country will cease to exist. Even if one is not particularly bothered by that thought, it would be an enormous tragedy for human existence as a whole if our culture were to disappear, a culture that has been represented, maintained, and developed by our people.... In order to protect Japan’s distinctive cultural expressions, the Japanese, as human beings who need bodies to exist, must have concrete means to defend themselves. Rearmament is therefore a necessity for the Japan of today. There are some who say that, trapped as we are between the two great powers of the United States and the Soviet Union, we should remain neutral. But such people are completely blind to the present situation. Faced with the alternative of being annexed by the Soviets or occupied by the American army, we should opt for the United States, which stands for freedom, rather than become victims of Soviet Communist and imperialist tactics.... Do we really have any choice between a country that lets the end justify the means and one that professes freedom, respects the law, and keeps faith with the world. Geography dictates that Japan must make a decision now.³¹

Interestingly, the large majority of intellectuals who responded to *Sekai*’s survey opposed the idea of rearmament. Suzuki’s position was by far the minority one. I cannot bring myself to accept the idea that without arming itself Japan will cease to exist as a country. But at the same time, I have only respect for his view that culture (Zen Buddhist culture in particular) is superior to nation and that without a nation the preservation and development of

³¹ SDZ 30:540–1.

culture is exceedingly difficult. I admire also the level-headedness of his appraisal of global political realities.

Suzuki was first and foremost a realist. Not only did he maintain a balanced perception of events in the world around him, he also refused to let himself be swayed by the demands of competing ideologies and “isms.” As each new situation presented itself, he reevaluated the circumstances and reached an independent decision based on how he perceived the facts. (Might this not be the working of what he called “no mind”?) We see this, for example, in the no-nonsense approach he took toward the San Francisco Peace Treaty. There was much opposition to this agreement from the Japanese intelligentsia, who protested against it on the grounds that it was not comprehensive enough, that it contravened the principles of Japan’s postwar constitution, that it made no provision for popular consensus, that it ignored China, and so forth.³² Suzuki was not ignorant of these arguments nor of the various principles and ideologies involved, but he did not make his decisions on the basis of them. His “position that is not a position,” if we may call it that, was rooted in his own spirituality which took its stand on “Great Mercy and Great Compassion” (大慈大悲).

QUESTIONING SUZUKI’S VIEWS OF SOCIETY AND THE STATE

Religion and the State

In his 1948 work “State and Religion” Suzuki commented that “religion, viewed from what might be called the standpoint of the absolute, is not concerned with matters of the state.”³³ This ties in with his view that “in Zen experience itself there is no democracy, nor is there imperialism or hegemonism.”³⁴ Zen—and as Suzuki saw it, religion in its true sense—“is concerned with the absolute individual self,” and “has nothing to do with the state.” Hence “the world of spiritual awareness is at peace regardless of what political system it is under.” In contrast, “The individual as conceived by the state is not a religious entity but rather a political or ethical one.”³⁵ This view in turn ties in with Suzuki’s recognition that war is the inevitable destiny of mankind on the one hand, and his tireless quest for ways to avert it on the other. Suzuki constantly emphasized that the basis of life must be in the religious self (i.e., in spirituality), but that human beings are also political and ethical beings that exist within a certain historical and social context.

³² SDZ 30:530–1.

³³ SDZ 9:287.

³⁴ 禪と民主主義 [Zen and democracy], 大乘禪 23/No. 1 (1 May 1946): 8.

³⁵ SDZ 9:287.

These views are fundamentally in line with those expressed by the young Suzuki in *A New Theory of Religion*: everything depends on whether the self is taken as a religious entity or as a political and ethical entity. In other words, it is a matter of the conflict and tension between religion and the state, and hence of the conflict and tension present in an individual as a religious and as a historicosocial entity. The young Suzuki wrote, as we remarked earlier, that if the state is not to obstruct the realization of the hopes and ideals of humanity, it must “be reformed when necessary.” A half-century later, he writes as if that time of necessity had arrived:

The role of the leaders who form the government is not so much to actively implement policies, but rather to supervise affairs as unobtrusively as possible. That is, government should cast such a pale shadow that one begins to wonder whether it even exists at all.... For that reason, the state as an organization propped up by scientific concepts and harboring imperialistic ideas and fanatical ideology is not compatible with human life. At some time or another it must face a fatal crisis.³⁶

From his youth and throughout his life Suzuki never regarded the state as absolute and never placed the state above the individual. In his view, the only possible absolute was “the awakening of spirituality.” Suzuki’s views in this regard are crystal clear. His assertions of “non-citizenship” and “non-nationality” were condemned by right-wingers who complained, “Has Suzuki ever thought of the debt he owes to his country, let alone to the emperor?”³⁷ In the last year of his life, Suzuki once remarked at a symposium that “I believe that anarchism is best.”³⁸ He was of course fully aware that anarchism was not feasible and he knew that there was no escape from “being a political and moral individual,” but perhaps there is a sense in which we may take his words as a sincere prayer for humanity. In any case, during the years just before and after the end of the war, Suzuki considered “spiritualization” to be the only possible way to reconstruct Japan. Because the period right after the war was a time of fundamental change of the state system, he pursued with increased vigor his youthful ideal “to make every action and movement of the state religious.”

³⁶ SDZ 8:339.

³⁷ 島田 享 Shimada Tōru, 禪学彷徨記 [Meanderings in Zen studies] (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1993), 138, 150.

³⁸ アメリカの不安 [Unrest in America], 心 5/10 (1 October 1952): 27. See also the comment reported at a colloquium in 鈴木大拙坐談集第二卷, 東洋と西洋 [Suzuki Daisetsu colloquium II: East and West] (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shinbunsha, 1971), 29. See also 無題放談 [Random discussions], 大法論 26/3 (1 March 1959): 113, for a statement in the same vein. Not included in the *Collected Works*, but later printed in 鈴木大拙坐談集第一卷, 人間の智恵 [Suzuki Daisetsu colloquium I: Human wisdom] (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shinbunsha, 1971).

Furthermore, Suzuki saw the life of the human person as caught up in contradiction. As an individual, a human being must be a religious entity, and at the same time as the citizen of a country, a historical and political entity. For him religion is based on compassion and the state on physical force. The problem of how to reconcile these two fundamentally incompatible standpoints is a cross we must all bear throughout life. We have no choice but to live with conflict, despite the tragedy that invariably follows in its wake. Human desire is unbounded; it brings progress and leads to destruction. The human being is constantly being pulled in two directions and lives in constant conflict and tension. This idea is essentially the same as, and in fact originates in, the fundamental Buddhist view that the passions, just as they are, are wisdom and enlightenment (煩惱即菩提). Here we also find Suzuki's view of human life:

Instead of saying, "It isn't possible so we shouldn't try," we should say, "It isn't possible so we should do it," because this is what being human is all about. It is what in Buddhism we call "pursuit" (欣求).³⁹

In this contradictory state of human existence, in full awareness of the impossibility of realization, Suzuki continued to make efforts. This is his act of "Great Mercy," his "bodhisattva path."

Zen Experience and Zen Thought

Suzuki was the first Zen Buddhist deliberately to distinguish between Zen experience and Zen thought, and to recognize the importance of the latter:

It is true that Zen transcends thought. However, this does not mean that Zen ignores thought. Zen experience can be articulated only after it has been formulated in thought. When this articulation is not present, ... Zen ceases to be Zen.⁴⁰

For Suzuki, even though there is no direct, immediate connection between Zen experience and thought, Zen experience must *become* thought. He elaborates elsewhere on this relationship:

Strictly speaking, Zen has no philosophy of its own. Its teaching is concentrated on an intuitive experience, and the intellectual content of this experience can be supplied by a system of thought not necessarily Buddhistic. If the masters find it more expedient for some reason, they may build up their own philosophical structure not always in accordance with the traditional interpretation. Zen Buddhists are sometimes

³⁹ "Unrest in America," 27.

⁴⁰ "Zen and Democracy," 9.

Confucianists, sometimes Taoists, or sometimes even Shintoists; Zen experience can also be explained by Western philosophy.⁴¹

Suzuki continues in the same vein in another place, writing that “there is no reason why Zen must be considered only from the viewpoint of Buddhism.”⁴² This raises the question of the relationship between Zen and Buddhism, and the relationship between the ultimate experience of Zen and other religions. For Suzuki, this ultimate experience is the same in all religions as it is for Zen, whatever name one chooses to give it. In the passage just cited, however, his only point was that Zen itself is not directly bound to thought.

Nevertheless, Suzuki insisted that the ultimate fact of experience be “expressed in thought”:

Buddhists must not fall behind in taking notice of current trends in the world today.... Buddhists who think their duty done when they have learned the simple traditional thought and practice, can be considered the greatest enemies of Zen, the snake in its bosom.... Thought is absolutely necessary.⁴³

This call for the necessity of thought in Buddhism is a constantly recurring theme of Suzuki's. He was convinced that Shinto's self-righteousness and narrow-mindedness prevented it from expressing itself in thought, even though he had occasion to observe many Buddhists who had drawn close to and ingratiated themselves with Shinto. Suzuki's statements during the war period reflect his fear that unless Zen found new ideas in which to express itself, not only would it be of no use to contemporary society, it would also compromise itself with the currents of the times and would in the end have a negative effect on the course of history. He further argued from the results of his own study of Zen that those Buddhists whose names have come down to us in posterity achieved a thought that was suited to the conditions and society of their day, as in the case of Rinzai's “Person” and Bankei's idea of the “Unborn.” Suzuki also prided himself on the fact that he was the first person in Zen to attempt a history of Zen thought.

But what is thought? The Japanese term *shisō* (思想) ordinarily combines three elements: a knowledge of present conditions, an understanding of the way things ought to be, and a means to realize the way things ought to be. In

⁴¹ SDZ 11:85–6. See *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 44–5.

⁴² SDZ 18:12. Note that the *Collected Works* contains a misprint that gives the direct opposite meaning. Instead of what is said in the original essay, “there is *no* reason why,” the text has “there is *every* reason why.”

⁴³ SDZ 29:452.

other words, thought always includes a recognition of the values of contemporary society but must have lasting, not merely ephemeral, significance. Although Zen experience or *satori*, the experience of ultimate reality, is an intuitive experience that transcends history and society and can only be understood by another when it is made conscious and expressed, Zen experience itself is value-neutral. It is without plan or continuity. How then are Zen experience and thought connected? In Suzuki's own case, there was no avoiding the question, since thought meant for him Zen thought. How exactly does "Zen experience" become "Zen thought"?

If Zen thought is not born immediately of Zen experience, what makes it "Zen"? As Suzuki explains it, Zen thought is always particular to the individual who has it. There is no Zen thought in general. It is always and ever the expression of a specific, definite process of ratiocination. When this process takes place in a Zen Buddhist, it can be called Zen thought. This of course raises the question, How does one decide who is a Zen Buddhist? The conventional wisdom in Japan has it that Zen Buddhists include the masters (beginning with Bodhidharma), persons who propagate Zen, and lay Buddhists such as Suzuki. But if we define Zen thought as no more than what happens when a Zen Buddhist thinks, then the term seems superfluous. If this term is to mean anything, surely there must be a more important connection between Zen and thought, and surely this connection must possess certain defining characteristics. Does this mean that Zen and thought necessarily entail one another? Zen people in general may try to deny that any such entailment exists and that there is anything definitively characteristic about "Zen thought." Yet Suzuki insists that there *is* such a thing as Zen thought—that indeed there must be. Therein lies his new Zen thought.

It is said that Zen Buddhism "does not rely on words and letters; it is a separate tradition outside the teachings." It has no fixed body of doctrine because the basis of Zen is experience, which is prior to doctrine. Zen experience always finds new modes of expressing itself, depending on the time and social circumstances in which it takes place, just as its teaching is continually growing and developing through the lives and thinking of individual Zen Buddhists. Though it professes not to rely on words and letters, it has produced a vast body of literature. As long as Zen is propagated and remains in existence, it must find such expression. Suzuki's "Zen thought" is one example of this.

The question of the relationship between Zen experience and Zen thought is not incidental to the relationship between religion and society. Suzuki's idea is that Zen *transcends* thought and morality but does not *ignore* them. Zen experience as such is independent of time and place, but as it takes place in human beings who live at a particular time and in a particular society, from the very moment it seeks expression it relies on language, praxis, and so

forth. That is, it takes on a worldly meaning. This leads to two important questions. First, to what extent is the individual aware of the meaning this expression has in the world? Second, how wide and how deep is the individual's awareness of the time and society in which he or she lives? These are not questions of non-discriminating wisdom (*prajñā*) but of discriminating knowledge (*viññāna*) that involves the intelligence and education of the person who has had the Zen experience. Zen consciousness and Zen thought differ according to one's learning and intellect.

For Suzuki, spirituality entails a thoroughgoing Great Mercy (大悲), Great Compassion (大慈), Vow (誓願), and "boundless and inexhaustible aspiration" (無辺無尽の悲願).⁴⁴ Zen experience for him is precisely the "awakening" of this spirituality at its very source. In this sense, it may be considered the fountainhead of Mahāyāna Buddhism. His idea of "Zen thought" consists in the identification of Zen experience with the awakening to spirituality and stresses the realization of Great Mercy and Great Compassion. For him, "Zen experience" that lacks this awakening to spirituality, Great Mercy, and Great Compassion is not Zen experience at all. This is why a living Zen thought is needed today.

In this connection, he criticized Zen Buddhists who put too much stress on the kōan and also those who valued enlightenment (上求菩提, 往相) over the salvation of sentient beings here below (下化衆生, 環相). In other words, Suzuki felt that in the contemporary world of Zen too much emphasis was being laid on "Zen experience" to the neglect of the saving acts of mercy (衆生濟度). In the Four Universal Vows of a Bodhisattva, the vow to save all sentient beings without exception (衆生無辺誓願度) precedes the vow to extinguish all the defiled passions (煩惱無尽誓願斷).⁴⁵ This is also part of the "Zen thought" of Suzuki, who understood Zen Buddhism as Mahāyāna.

As shown in the *Oxherding Pictures*, the third stage, finding the ox, still leaves seven stages to go. Traditionally, the ascetical practice following the attainment of *satori* (聖胎長養) was considered much more important than the ascetical practice undertaken to attain *satori* in the first place. The fact that it is so demanding shows just how difficult it is to understand the times and society one lives in and how difficult it is to transform Zen experience into Zen thought. In any case, Zen experience by itself is not enough. "Unless one's will and feelings have become Zen, the experience is not genuine." Even after awakening, "effort is required...until Zen and the personality function

⁴⁴ SDZ 9:165.

⁴⁵ See 「煩惱・宗教・近代文明」談話会, [Defiled passions, religion, and modern civilization], 知と行 3/10 (1 October 1948): 1-23. Later reprinted in 鈴木大拙坐談集第三卷, 現代人と宗教 [Suzuki Daisetsu colloquium III: Religion and people today] (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shinbunsha, 1972), 257-97.

in unison.”⁴⁶ (In fact, Śākyamuni and Maitreya are said to be doing ascetical practice still.) By continuous practice throughout one’s life and the renewal of *satori* over and over, one deepens Zen experience, and this in turn gives shape to a creative discriminating insight independent of how much or how broad one’s previous insight had been. This is the way in which doctrine comes to life and Zen thought takes form.

Zen and War

Even though Zen experience is said to transcend all thought, the claim has been made that Zen thought and Zen consciousness have played a particular role in promoting warfare, even within Buddhism. In an essay published in 1914, Suzuki wrote:

Someone asked a Zen practitioner his opinion on the present war. The practitioner answered, “I have no particular opinion, and in particular I have no opinion as a Zen practitioner.” ...Zen practitioners have no set view with regard to war—at least I as an individual have no set views.⁴⁷

This may be, but during both the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War, Zen was very popular. It is also true that Zen gained popularity in tandem with the development of the warrior class during the Kamakura period. In his book *Zen and Japanese Culture* Suzuki admits that Zen gave ethical and philosophical support to the warrior class insofar as it taught that in the face of any circumstance one should be prepared to risk one’s life without hesitation: “Ethically, because Zen teaches that once one has decided on a certain course, one should not look back; philosophically, because it treats both life and death with impartiality.”⁴⁸ The context of these remarks was the warrior class in Japanese history, not the military in the modern state, but it seems a short and logical step to substitute *soldier* for *samurai* and thus apply Zen’s spiritual composure and its transcendence of life and death to the present world as well.

The emphasis on the here-and-now in Zen thought breaks the ties between before and after. It breaks with all value judgments and distinctions between good and evil. Recognizing this here-and-now and stressing it as “non-thought” is also part of Zen thought. The distinction is important, as is the fact that during the war this idea in effect encouraged soldiers to push on and do battle without a thought, totally unconcerned with the historical and social circumstances. The emphasis on the here-and-now is related to the Zen

⁴⁶ SDZ 17:237.

⁴⁷ SDZ 28:547.

⁴⁸ *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 61; SDZ 11:34.

idea that “wherever you stand is the right place” (立處皆真) and the ideal of “becoming a master of one’s circumstances” (隨處作主). By discouraging one from pausing to think rationally, such teaching blinds one to the realities of history and society. Any situation whatsoever, any setting can become “true,” so that one can even murder enthusiastically. Such Zen ideas of the here-and-now are particularly efficacious in time of war, as not a few Zen Buddhists recognized during the Second World War, lending the arm of Zen to the war effort.

For his part, Suzuki never stressed this kind of thinking. As noted above, he stated emphatically that “Zen absolutely never teaches one to throw one’s life away.” His idea of what constituted Zen thought is altogether different. In *Zen and Japanese Culture*, which was written in 1938 just prior to the outbreak of the World War, he does note the connection between Zen and samurai culture, which may lead the modern reader to assume that he had the modern soldier in mind, but this was not the case. His intention was to show that since Zen experience itself is value-neutral, it can be adapted to various times and societies. The here-and-now is the key to Zen experience, but one must be wary of emphasizing it without qualification.

Zen and Suzuki’s View of the Japanese People

Leaving for the United States of America at the age of twenty-six and encountering a totally different civilization and culture in his ten years of life there, Suzuki was forced to compare Japanese and American culture and civilization and to rethink his own identity in the process. This led him to some remarkably accurate observations on the merits and demerits of America in the early, formative stages of a capitalist society upheld by modern scientific technology. He turned a similar eye on his homeland and wrote a considerable body of social commentary. During his life in the United States, Suzuki had to rethink and reintegrate his own identity, and this brought him to a heightened realization that an indispensable element of his identity was the fact that he was not American but Japanese, not Christian but Buddhist. That he should have loved his homeland and been concerned for its welfare is hardly to be wondered at. Still, as we noted above, throughout his life he never absolutized his country or made it his primary concern. He was not a nationalist or national supremacist. He remained a religious person who sought to base his life on his own religious experience or “spirituality,” a believer in the universality of the spiritual dimension who was both a cosmopolite and an individualist.

Whether one accepts Suzuki’s idea of spirituality depends greatly on how that spirituality is expressed in the concrete. *Spirituality* (靈性) was not a term of his own coinage, but it appears already in his first essay “The Land of

Spiritual Peace and Enlightenment.”⁴⁹ In his later writings, expressions like “spiritual awakening” and “Japanese spirituality” became important elements in his discussion of Zen thought. Was Suzuki ever able to formulate a satisfactory explanation of what he meant by the word? For all his talk about the universality of spirituality, are his arguments really convincing? Time and again he stressed the importance of explaining Buddhism in rational, European languages, and he himself wrote over thirty volumes in English in an attempt to do so. A familiar refrain in his writings is that insofar as one seeks to explain in words, then one’s words must be based on reason and be rationally convincing. Otherwise, the explanations will lack universality. In principle, therefore, he believed that what cannot be rationally explained to a non-Japanese, cannot be explained to a Japanese either. Suzuki spent his life in the pursuit of trying to express the inexpressible. If he was not able to explain Zen Buddhism completely, it is because it is a task that must always be left incomplete and handed on to posterity.

The problem of explaining Zen rationally is the problem of our attitude to matters we cannot convince ourselves of rationally. Do we simply admit that certain things exist without a rational explanation, or do we refuse to allow that possibility and simply deny them from the start? Suzuki once made a remark to the effect that Americans could not understand Zen. And when asked whether anyone in the United States understood Zen, he replied with a flat, “No.”⁵⁰ Some have read this exchange and concluded that Suzuki was convinced that Americans cannot understand Zen, that Zen is something superior and special that only Japanese can appreciate. They further read into his comments the belief that the Japanese people themselves are somehow special and superior. Nothing could be further from the truth in Suzuki’s case, and only a complete disregard for context can yield such conclusions. Interest in Zen in the Western world has a very short history, and the lack of understanding only demonstrates the difficulty of Buddhism’s advance eastward. As Suzuki himself clearly stated, “It is not something that can be accomplished in one or two years, or ten or twenty. It may take fifty or a hundred years, but there is no cause for worry.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ 安心立命の地 [The land of spiritual peace and enlightenment], 宗教 26 (5 December 1893), and 28 (5 February 1894).

⁵⁰ アメリカの禪を語る [A dialogue on Zen in America], 禪文化 14 (1 February 1959): 28.

⁵¹ “A Dialogue on Zen in America,” 22. The dialogue deals with the general difficulty of the spread of Buddhism eastwards and mentions several points in particular, among them the understanding of Zen in the United States up to 1950, and “beat-Zen” or Zen as a passing fashion. Problems on the part of the Japanese who were trying to propagate Zen included the failure to fully appreciate cultural differences, the narrow outlook of the Zen masters, and especially the lack of “intellectual integrity” (知的節操) and “moral pride” (道徳的矜持).

It took centuries for Buddhism to spread from India to China and centuries more to spread from China to Japan. In the course of its history Buddhism took on specifically Chinese and specifically Japanese forms. If Buddhism is to spread through the Western world, it is obvious that it will take time, and also that it will take forms quite different from those of Japanese Buddhism. D. T. Suzuki was a pioneer in introducing and propagating Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, to the world of the West. For this, at the very least, history will remember him.

[TRANSLATED BY RICHARD SZIPPL & THOMAS KIRCHNER]