

# When There is Nothing Less to be Said

—Reading D. T. Suzuki after Carl Jung, Eric Fromm,  
and Jacques Lacan (aka Slavoj Žižek)—

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## Introduction

D. T. Suzuki has had an extensive impact on the modern intelligentsia. There have been various reactions to his work, ranging from awe to rejection. As a way of grouping these reactions, I examine here how three key European psycho-analytic theorists have responded to Suzuki. I see these three reactions as being broadly representative of how others have dealt with his work.

## Carl Jung

Carl Jung wrote the “Foreword” for Suzuki’s book, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, published in 1934. In this foreword, he expresses great admiration for Suzuki’s work in describing Zen and *satori* to Westerners. Jung believes that the experience of Zen and *satori* is “a way of enlightenment which is practically impossible for the European to appreciate.” (1949: 10) He also remarks that, “great as is the value of Zen Buddhism for the understanding of the religious transformation process, its use among Western people is very improbable. The spiritual conceptions necessary to Zen are missing in the West.” (1949: 24)

What is to be noted here is Jung’s assumption that he will not be able to understand what Suzuki is fully saying. Jung feels he does not have the cultural resources necessary to effectively *read* Suzuki. Jung’s sense of distance from Zen and Suzuki is a respectful and humble one. He realizes he is in the presence of wisdom that he will not fathom. This is because with Zen we are dealing with insights and techniques which have been honed

over the centuries far away from the West. The religious institutions and philosophical movements of the West have never produced a similar spiritual movement to that of Zen. Psycho-therapy, according to Jung, is the closest we have. This is because psycho-therapy deals with the integration of the unconscious with the conscious. For Jung, “the unconscious is the matrix of all metaphysical assertions, of all mythology, all philosophy (in so far as it is not merely critical) and all forms of life which are based upon psychological suppositions.” (1949: 23) In other words, the unconscious communicates to us wisdom (as distinct from just mental problems). Zen’s success is being able to access the unconscious for such unfathomable wisdom. However, to practice Zen one needs to have emerged from a Zen culture, something absent in the West. One side remark worth making here is that, as far as this “Foreword” goes, Jung’s reasons for seeing Zen as something very alien to the West does not seem to be based on any notions of a “collective psyche” or “collective unconscious.” For Jung, the unconscious is common to all humans, it is just the way we access it that is culturally different.

In reading Jung’s reading, one cannot help admire his generous spirit and open-mindedness. These are the words of a wise and kind listener. However, in terms of approaching Suzuki’s ideas there is something dissatisfying about this style of reading. The sense of awe at the otherness of Asia creates an atmosphere of apartness which, in the long run, can lead nowhere other than the cold and distant respect of non-intimate strangers. This tends to run against the tendency of humans to want to understand that which makes them curious. In fact, looking at Jung’s description of the unconscious, it would seem that any new ideas or philosophies we hear about cannot but penetrate our minds somewhere, somehow, eventually. The result is that we can never for very long read another with the intention of not reading them. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Miyuki Mokusen, a Japanese Jungian, would many decades later write an article in the Suzuki-founded *Eastern Buddhist Journal* entitled “The Psychodynamics of Buddhist Meditation: A Jungian Perspective” in which the author would express his hopes “that my discussion, which aims at communicating what I consider to be the essentials of my experience in Jungian analysis and Buddhist meditation will have a universal dimension.”

(1977: 156) People cannot help but knowing what they know from what they have read.

### **Eric Fromm**

Fromm's reading of Suzuki shares the reverential tone of Jung, but unlike Jung, he feels that Suzuki offers something learnable and applicable if we take the time to read him fully and properly. For instance, Fromm footnotes a comment he makes about Zen as follows: "D. T. Suzuki's writings on Zen Buddhism, [...] are by far the best source for understanding the fundamental ideas of Zen Buddhism. Precisely because of their authenticity Suzuki's books require more effort from the reader than a number of less authentic and 'easier' books." [My ellipses] (1999: 38)

Fromm organized a conference to discuss the links between Zen and psychoanalysis in Mexico in 1957, at which D. T. Suzuki was the main speaker and center of focus. The psycho-analysts present were there to learn about Zen. It was not the other way around. (Suzuki wrote elsewhere: "Zen does not advocate an analytical method to reach the subjectum, for it knows this method has always an object for further analysis and can never achieve the end." (1975: 1))

The contrast between Jung and Fromm's reactions to Suzuki can possibly be traced to contrasts in their respective psycho-analytic ideologies. Jung was to a large extent the conservative romantic who saw the organic wholeness of cultures and civilizations. Fromm was part of a broader humanist movement which was more interested in challenging the old structures, basing human action in the modern individual rather than the atavistic collective. Suzuki, with his emphasis on both the iconoclastic elements of Zen and the orientalist harmony of Japanese society, was in a unique position to range over, however artificially, this gap between romanticism and humanism.

Fromm was, thus, in many ways archetypal of another kind of reader of Suzuki, the student or disciple one. Unlike Jung, who was happy to read exotic descriptions of Zen, shrug in wonder, and then move on, Fromm wanted to learn more about it, and to incorporate it into his own understandings and

experiences of the world. Many intellectuals in the West were similarly swayed by the power of Suzuki's writings to become disciple-like readers. This power resided in Suzuki's uncompromising assertion that what Zen had to say was, on the one hand, something of absolute truth, and on the other, something hereto alien to the Western mind. The rhetorical effects of such assertions—here I write about the mystery of life but you may not be able to read it—are too alluring to easily shirk off.

However, the problem with this style of reading is that the reader, in loyalty to the master, will read anything into the text to paper-over cracks, contradictions, or conflicts that may appear. If we read Suzuki and find that the Zen religion of peace has a tendency to fetishize samurai swords, well, we must have misread him. Need to try harder.

### Jacque Lacan

The next Suzuki-reading psychoanalyst we look at is Jacques Lacan, in the guise of Slovenian Žižek. The reading is critical. Žižek takes Suzuki (and Buddhism in general) to task on a number of issues. To start with, there are two quotes from Suzuki's writings that appeared in Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (1997) that seem to have particularly irked Žižek. The first one concerns a comment that appears in the chapter entitled "Zen and Swordsmanship II" in Suzuki's widely read *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959). Žižek uses the quote in both his "Foreword" to *For they know not what they do* (2002) and his book *Less Than Nothing* (2012). Suzuki (alas) wrote:

... it is really not he but the sword itself that does the killing. He had no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim. It is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice, which is the function of mercy. (1959: 145)

Next, there is Suzuki's comment about Zen being apolitical to the extent that it could be compatible with Fascism (or any other political system). Žižek refers to (but does not quote) the comment in *Less than Nothing*. Here is the

original Suzuki quote.

Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy, no set of concepts or intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death, by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatisms.” (1959: 63)

Whereas previous readers would have seen such remarks as a challenge to our overly-moralizing Western dualistic ways of thinking, Žižek and similar critical readers are willing to take Suzuki on, stick up their hand and challenge the master. And indeed, Žižek’s criticisms are not limited to Suzuki’s politics and phony pacifism. There is also a broader critique of core Buddhist philosophy.

Žižek asks in *Less Than Nothing* a basic question of Buddhism, “How did the Wheel of Desire emerge out of the eternal Void?” Hinayana and Mahayana avoid the question, but Vajrayana “hints at dark demonic forces” beyond (2012: 110). It is easy to see here the problem for non-theistic Buddhism which sees reality, when it is being suffered, as a splitting off from an undisturbed, unified reality. Where does the split come from? The dharmakaya cannot have willed it since this would involve personhood which would make it theistic, and less than benevolent at that. If we suffer because that is the way the world works, then this suggests brutal naturalism, which means that the miraculous and spiritual aspects of Buddhism, as recounted in the sutras, must be based on willful wishful thinking.

Žižek also problematizes the final aims of Buddhism, the stopping of the wheel of life, the cycle of *samsara*. Buddhism cannot explain how this wheel can be stopped if one is to be still human. For psycho-analysis, the turning of the wheel makes us human. It is what we are as mindful creatures with consciousness shaped by the unrelenting churning of our inner drives. Žižek

summarizes the clash between Buddhism and psycho-analysis on this point as follows:

What psychoanalysis adds to Buddhism is thus in fact a new version of Galileo's *eppur si muove*: imagine a Lacanian being tortured by a New Age Western Buddhist into admitting that inner peace can be achieved; after the forced concession, as he leaves the room, he quietly mumbles: "But nonetheless, it continues to move!" (2012: 131)

Psycho-analysis out-koans Buddhism!

### **Après Lacan**

Is it possible to read Suzuki after Lacan/Žižek in a way that can counter these criticisms? What I propose here is not a strong or coherent response to Žižek, but rather the vague outlines of a possible reply. The aim is to seek a way of reading Suzuki that can take on board Žižek's criticisms but still represent Suzuki as a worthwhile thinker. In other words, I seek to consider what a mature response to Žižek's attack could look like. (An immature response, by the way, would look something like this: "Žižek is just a dualistic gaijin who will just never understand Zen. And Zen is beyond words anyway, no matter what he says.")

### **Much to say**

In answer to the political charges against Suzuki, a plea must be made to read these remarks in the context in which they were produced. The remarks are, in themselves, indefensible, of course. Fascism is evil and killing people is always innately ugly, no matter what the cause. I have no argument there. However, I would counter that it is a bit of an over-reaction to brandish these remarks alone as evidence of fundamental thoughtcrime on Suzuki's part. Sure, Suzuki said these things, but he said a lot of things. For instance, Noburu Koga in 1944 attended a lecture by Suzuki in Kamakura, and was

astonished to hear him say that Japan would lose the war. At the same event he heard Suzuki criticize young men being sent into the Kamikaze *Tokubetsu Kōgekitai*. As Koga remarks, 「これは極め付き危険な、勇気を要する発言である。十九年には東京空襲が始まり、言論統制が厳しくなり…」 (“This was a genuinely dangerous and courageous statement to make. In 1944, the Tokyo air raids had begun, and restrictions on free speech had been greatly tightened …”) (Koga 2000: 3). Not to sound too clichéd about it, Suzuki was a complex person living in complicated times.

### The many Zens

It is fair to point out, however, that Žižek’s view is not that Suzuki was a closet fascist, but that because he viewed Zen as a technique, he was both unwilling and unable to morally judge and react to the militarism that emerged in his times. This is true to some extent, Suzuki did oversell the Samurai spiel in his *Zen and Japanese Culture* in a way that suggests remarkable naivety about the consequences of martial forces. But a response would be to say that for Suzuki “Zen” was many things, not just a technique. Zen was also a way of life (or what could be described as a vague system of social values) and an anti-dualist body of philosophy. That Suzuki was never willing to explicitly differentiate these different meanings of “Zen” was no doubt due to his conservative outlook which saw the organic whole of Japanese society. Japanese people think Zen philosophy which makes them live by Zen values, which makes them, now and again, do certain things, such as kendo, using Zen techniques. However, if we more carefully divide and separate the different meanings Suzuki gave to Zen, (which I list here as (1) Zen as technique, (2) Zen as a value system or way of life, and (3) Zen as non-dualistic philosophy) we can go some way towards answering the charge that Zen is a mere technique and as such useless when we need to take moral decisions and challenge exploitative social structures.

## **Zen Technique**

If we go back to Suzuki's comments about swordsmanship, we should note that the techniques of wielding the sword, whilst taking place in a frame of no-mind, also take place in a wider frame where the action to be engaged in has arisen due to some earlier (and not at all unconscious or no-mind) decision having been made. A samurai facing his enemy still has to decide who the enemy is. There is no Zen technique for doing this. (Otherwise the enemy army only has to lasso the samurai, spin him around, and send him back charging into his own lines, like a derailed flesh-chopping maniac robot). Sure, Zen is a technique and as such could be practiced by fascists in certain limited contexts (as could psycho-therapy), but this is only one meaning of the word "Zen" as employed by Suzuki.

## **Zen way of life**

Suzuki was fairly explicit that Zen is not (solely) an esoteric training of the conscious, but is also a particular and concrete way of life that one can watch and observe in Japan. The contours of this way of life, the value system that informs it, are never explicitly listed but are not hard to see. For Suzuki the Zen life is agrarian and avoidant of social conflict. Social class functions not to exploit but to preserve a wider organic nation that nurtures all. It is a conservative vision, but hardly a fascist one in any fair usage of the term. The point is that far from seeing life as an illusion and hence of no intrinsic worth, Suzuki, when in Zen as way of life mode, sees life as joyous and valuable. And when Zen techniques are put into practice they are done so in the context of this wider frame of the Zen life. Again, my point is not to defend Suzuki's social vision but to defend him from the attack that all he ever saw in Zen was mindless techniques for those who believe life is nothing.

## **Zen philosophy**

Indeed, if Suzuki's writings were merely a celebratory portrait of a pre-



modern pastoral nation made happy by Zen, there would not be much worth defending in them. However, I want to argue that there is a third meaning that Suzuki gave to Zen, and that is Zen as a non-dualistic philosophy. Of course Suzuki was always quick to push this meaning of Zen back into the second meaning, Zen as a way of life, with his constant declarations about the non-philosophical nature of Zen. But we must save Suzuki from his own muddled-thinking. If Zen is non-dualistic then it simply cannot be reduced to particularist, contingent, historically-embedded, culturally-specific practices, since this would trap it within fundamentally dualistic thinking.

So how does Suzuki's Zen philosophy work? This is how I read it. Other readers are welcome to read it differently. (But nationality must not grant any reader privileges over others. Let's transcend together the odious Zen in the art of Japanese über-nationalist ideology maintenance.) So, Zen philosophy is grounded in experience of the world. *Satori* is, broadly, awareness by the mind of its own constructedness. It involves the seer and the seeing being one, a radical reflexivity that is hard to express afterwards. The experience is in the *real* and of the *real*. It is absolute knowledge which means that it cannot be *not* known after it is known. This absolute knowledge is not to be confused with omniscience. Perhaps it should not be confused even with wisdom. This experience is hard to represent in the *symbolic*. Its truth-event can only be socially recognized, afterwards, in an (oh so revolutionary) Zen institutional or cultural setting where conventional and prior symbolic realms are not operational. The only way to express and explain Zen to others outside this culture zone is through the *imaginary*, which is why Suzuki's accounts of Zen tended to be almost fictional: koan fables and samurai fantasies. However, the knowledge that *satori* grants, hard to position as it is in the symbolic order, does lead towards an unrelenting dialectic view of reality where A is B and therefore A is not B (Suzuki's *soku-hi* logic). Perhaps, in the end, Suzuki's philosophy was not a million miles away from Hegel and Lacan.

### **Eppur Si Muove**

Of the three readers of Suzuki examined above—Jung, Fromm, and

Lacan/Žižek—it is Lacan/Žižek who is probably the most helpful for bringing Suzuki forward into our times and making him still relevant for contemporary readers. An engaged critical reading of Suzuki can help us sift through his work with active and engaged eyes, and help us categorize and compartmentalize that which is of value and that which is junk.

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