Zen Essay, Research Paper

An Introduction to Zen Buddhism

No other figure in history has played a bigger part in opening the West to Buddhism than the eminent Zen author, D.T. Suzuki. One of the world’s leading authorities on Zen Buddhism, Suzuki authored more than a hundred popular and scholarly works on the subject. A brilliant and intuitive scholar, Dr. Suzuki communicated his insights in a lucid and energetic fashion.

Diasetz Teitaro Suzuki was born in Japan in 1870, received his philosophical training as a Buddhist disciple at the great Zen monastery at Kamakura, and was a distinguished professor of Buddhist philosophy at Otani University, in Kyoto, Japan. Dr. Suzuki dedicated his life to the study of Zen Buddhism and to the interpretation and effective communication of its philosophy and concepts to the Western reader. He passed away in 1966.

In An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, one of his most popular and respected works, Suzuki explains concepts and terminology such as satori, zazen, and koans, as well as the various elements of this philosophy. But while Mr. Suzuki takes nothing for granted concerning the reader’s understanding of the fundamentals, he does not give a merely rudimentary overview. All of his insights, particularly regarding the elements of the unconscious mind and the relation of Zen philosophy to traditional Western philosophy, go far beyond other philosophical and religious sources for their penetrating clarity and timeless wisdom.

What is most important about D.T. Suzuki’s work, however—and what comes across so powerfully in this book, is his unparalleled ability to communicate the experiential aspect of Zen. The intensity here with which Zen philosophy comes to life is without parallel in the entire canon of Buddhist literature. Suzuki stands apart from all other Zen Buddhist teachers and writers before or since mainly because of his exceptional ability to eloquently capture in words the seemingly inexpressible essence of Zen. Where so many other men have failed, he has succeeded, and succeeded brilliantly. Suzuki was a master at teaching by example and anecdote, and this book is a good example of that technique.

As he describes so well in An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, Suzuki’s own realization of who he really was, his grasping of the fundamental principle of existence, came when he was only twenty-six years old. He had been studying Zen for some years but without much success, and was increasingly demoralized by his failure to reach the enlightenment he so fervently sought. Then, in 1896, he was selected by his renowned teacher, Soyen Shaku, to go to North America to help translate the classic text, the Tao Te Ching, into English. (Suzuki 54)

The pressure of his imminent departure turned out to be what was needed. Suzuki realized that the Zen retreat scheduled for just before he was due to leave Japan might be his very last opportunity, in the immediate future at least, of solving the koan he was working on. Determined to solve the puzzle, he redoubled his efforts and threw all his energies into one final attempt to reach an understanding of the concept that had thus far eluded him.

Up until then he had been conscious of the koan in his mind. But to be conscious of Mu is to be separate from it. Towards the end of his stay at the Zen retreat, on about the fifth day, he ceased to be conscious of Mu and understood that he was one with Mu, and identified with Mu, so that there was no longer the separateness implied by being conscious of Mu.

Suzuki explains in the book that this was samadhi, but that samadhi is not enough. One must come out of that state, be awakened from it, and that awakening is wisdom. That moment of coming out of the samadhi and seeing it for what it is—that is satori. He relates that his first thought as he was awakened from that state of deep samadhi by the sound of a small hand bell being struck, was that he finally understood the concept at long last.

Suzuki teaches in An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, that when penetrating deep down into the center of one’s own being one finds a nameless transparency, an awake space filled by all the world, from one’s own thoughts and feelings and body to all of the stars in the heavens. This still, spacious nothingness is the heart of everyone’s being. Thus to find this nothingness is to see that one is fundamentally united with all beings. At root there is only one—the One. (Suzuki 96)

Furthermore, to the Zen Buddhist, awakening to the One is primarily a matter of actual seeing, of bare attention, rather than intellectual understanding—vital as understanding is. This seeing is not yet another state of mind that comes and goes. It is awake No-mind, the foundational ground of being that underlies everything and is the source of all states of mind, including samadhi. The contents of mind come and go in No-mind.

But what Mr. Suzuki strives to make very clear in his book is that seeing who you really are does not mean that you now know what everyone is thinking, or what is going to happen next year. You don’t necessarily develop any special intellectual powers, which can be both confusing and a distraction. Realization is in fact simpler and more available than this. What is given in the present moment, given not to a separate person but arising within the edgeless space of awareness, is seen and understood by a Zen Buddhist to be enough for that particular moment. (Suzuki 145)

But Suzuki cautions that one glimpse of one’s true nature is not enough. We need to stabilize awareness. In other words, we need to continue attending to who we really are, for our nature is already and always stable. Awakening more deeply to our fundamental steadiness, we realize we have never really been rooted in any other place at all. Deepening this awareness involves all of our energies, yet at the same time it is simply being natural.

Growing into adulthood, we became profoundly identified with our self-image. The discovery that this image is not our fundamental nature takes time to get used to. But this is in fact a letting go rather than an accumulation of more information. We come to realize, again and again, that there is at root nothing to achieve, nowhere to go, nothing to be. We are reminded instead by Suzuki that in Zen, each individual is an absolute entity, and as such that person is related to all other individuals; and that this nexus of infinite interrelationships between everyone and everything is made possible in the realm of Emptiness because they all find they are existing there as individual realities. (Suzuki 151)

Also, as we keep reawakening to our ‘Original Face’, as Zen puts it, which is present in the very midst of our busy lives, we discover that this is a natural and effective way of living. Though we discover there is nothing to do at center, and no one there to do it, we find to our amazement that plenty of activity is issuing forth from this inactivity, this stillness, this absence.

Suzuki, in his concise and assuring style, convinces us through a number of insightful examples, that gradually, each in our own way, we can discover that living from the Source, which often feels like living from Not-knowing, has an uncanny wisdom about it. It can be trusted. Others have experienced this revelation, and so can we.

One interesting highlight of An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, is when Suzuki relates that his lay Buddhist name, ‘Daisetsu’, means ‘Great Simplicity’. In later years, however, Suzuki joked that it really meant ‘Great Stupidity’. But this isn’t only a joke, it has a deeper and more profound meaning as well. It is similar to the idea of the holy fool.

It is what the English philosopher Douglas Harding calls ‘alert idiocy’. To grasp the fundamental principle of existence one must ultimately recognize and understand that deep down one knows nothing, yet paradoxically this nothingness is in fact the infinitely wise, loving, and dynamic source of all things.

D.T. Suzuki lived to the ripe old age of 96. He was well-known for his dedicated industriousness, right up to the end of his life, and for his deep-rooted warmth and optimism. One of his favorite teachings was to remember what a frail thing life was, and this being so, to consider everyday of your life your last and dedicate it to the fulfillment of your obligations. Never let the thought of a long life seize upon you, for then you are apt to indulge in all kinds of dissipation, and end your days in dire disgrace.

Having read Mr. Suzuki’s book I have the highest regard for his intellect and his warm humanity, which come through on every page. While trying to read and understand all that he is saying is difficult for someone unfamiliar with Zen Buddhism, the progress I made while reading his words was amazing to me. He has taken an intricate subject and somehow made it decipherable and understandable to anyone who is willing to devote some time and concentration to the task. The man was a gifted communicator indeed.

As a religious philosopher he stands second to none in the Twentieth Century, and has left behind a fine legacy of work for future generations to read and contemplate.