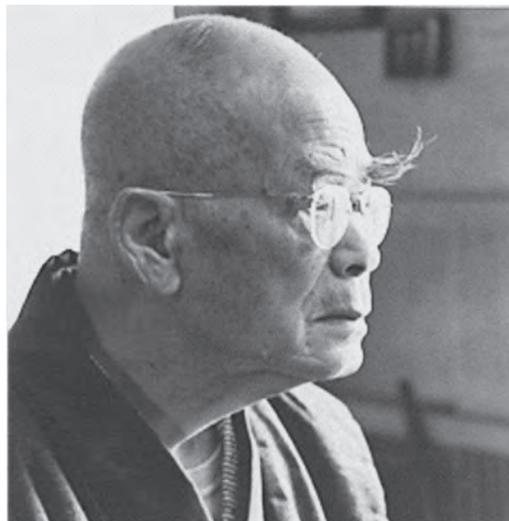


D. T. SUZUKI

A Biographical Summary

By Eric Cunningham



D. T. Suzuki. Source: *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* at <http://tinyurl.com/qjsk22w>.

Suzuki worked effectively across cultural, social, and generational boundaries to help articulate a new historical consciousness whose full effects have yet to be realized.

It would be difficult to name any world religious or cultural figure of the twentieth century who did more to transform modern civilization than Zen Buddhist scholar Daisetsu Teitaro (D. T.) Suzuki (1870–1966). While we might look to such luminaries as the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, or Mother Teresa and note the profound changes their lives brought to postwar global consciousness, the influence they exercised was of a different species than Suzuki’s. D. T. Suzuki did not just hold up a “spiritual” mirror to the modern West to reveal its moral contradictions, nor did he engage in activism of any kind. He was, rather, in his unofficial capacity as Zen’s “apostle to the West,” a spirit-minded scholar who consciously wove his life’s work into the fabric of history, helping a modern global society reconsider its assumptions, aspirations, and mode of operating. As a mentor to such international culture producers as Carl Jung, Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, Allen Ginsberg, Martin Heidegger, John Cage, and Gary Snyder—to name but a few—Suzuki worked effectively across cultural, social, and generational boundaries to help articulate a new historical consciousness whose full effects have yet to be realized. While he may not have occupied as strong a position in the hearts and minds of the masses as other modern spiritual leaders, Suzuki was indeed unique in his contributions to the world’s religious culture.

As an ambassador of global spirituality, Suzuki’s historical timing was impeccable—and by this I do not refer merely to his entrance upon the postwar American cultural stage in the 1950s but also to his less conspicuous part in the germinal exchange of intellectual culture in the late nineteenth century, when his translation of Abbot Shaku Sōen’s address, “The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by Buddha,” was read to the delegates of the World Parliament of Religions at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As a twenty-year-old lay disciple of the Zen Engakuji Temple in Kamakura Japan, Suzuki’s proficiency in English landed him the job of translating the abbot’s speech; the abbot himself had been invited to represent Japanese Buddhism at this first-ever gathering of world religious dignitaries. The successful communication of Buddhist concepts to a “scientific-minded” Western audience at the Chicago Parliament was the starting point of a fascinating and fruitful dialogue between Zen and the Western world. Suzuki’s role in this dialogue made

him a living icon of the most transformational century in human history. Throughout his career, which covered more than two-thirds of the twentieth century, Suzuki was the unchallenged spokesman for Zen and, by extension, for Buddhism in general. By further extension, Suzuki became the spokesman for East Asian culture in its totality, a task he accepted with a dual sense of responsibility and delight.

Suzuki was born in 1870 in Kanazawa City, which had been the traditional capital of the Kaga domain, and became the modern capital of Ishikawa Prefecture after Japan’s Meiji Restoration of 1868. The reign of the Emperor Meiji (r. 1867–1912) brought dramatic changes to Japanese social, cultural, economic, and political life, as a revolutionary ruling clique eliminated the feudal institutions of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) and replaced them wholesale with modern practices and policies. For people of Suzuki’s generation, rapid change and modernization were the mainstays of everyday life, as was the challenge of preserving the salutary customs of the past from the tidal wave of historical reinvention that swept over Japan. The people of Suzuki’s “Meiji generation”—whose lives spanned a compressed trajectory of modernization, ascent to Imperial power, military expansion, total war, total defeat, and foreign occupation—came, in the end, to harbor great suspicions about the process of modernization and often found themselves conflicted about the much-vaunted benefits of modern civilization.

Suzuki’s father was a physician from a low-level samurai clan who died during Suzuki’s childhood, leaving the family in poverty. Nevertheless, his mother saw to it that he received a good education, sending him to modern public schools in Kanazawa and then to the University of Tokyo in 1891. A shortage of funds ended Suzuki’s formal studies in philosophy, but by the time he left school, he was already a student of the *rōshi* (Zen master) Imakita Kōsen (1816–

1892), of Engakuji Temple in Kamakura. Lacking train fare, Suzuki would walk all night after the week’s classes, arriving at the monastery in time to sit for morning meditation. His withdrawal from university allowed him to spend all his time at the temple, and he soon became a trusted disciple of Kōsen as well as Sōen, who became abbot upon Kōsen’s death. His presence at Engakuji was a boon for the new abbot who, as noted above, needed a translator for his speech to the Parliament of Religions.

Among the audience for Sōen's paper in Chicago was Paul Carus, a German émigré who lived in LaSalle, Illinois, and owned Open Court Press, a publisher of "Oriental" religious texts. Carus was so impressed by Sōen's address that he asked the abbot to remain in Illinois and help him translate new works for the press. Although Sōen declined the opportunity, he recommended Suzuki for the job, and by 1897, Suzuki was in the United States, living in Carus's mansion and dividing his time between household chores and translation. During this first eleven-year stint as a global scholar, Suzuki translated the Chinese classic *Dao de Jing* and Ashvaghosha's "canonical" *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*. He also interpreted for Rōshi Sōen on the latter's trip to the United States in 1905 and translated a collection of his old master's essays in a publication called *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*. In 1907, Suzuki published his first English-language book, *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, a series of essays that he wrote for Carus's journal, *The Monist*. While there had yet to occur anything as potent or encompassing as the "Zen boom" of the 1950s and 1960s, Suzuki, at this early date, had established himself as a front-rank interpreter of Asian religions for the English-speaking world.

In 1909, Suzuki returned to Japan and began teaching at Gakushuin University, which at the time was a private aristocratic college. During his tenure at Gakushuin, he continued both his Zen meditation and his academic writing on Buddhism. In 1911, he married Beatrice Erskine Lane, a Scottish-American theosophist who had earned degrees from both Radcliffe and Columbia universities. For ten years, Suzuki and Beatrice lived in a cottage on the Engakuji grounds, but with the death of Sōen in 1919—and Suzuki's resignation from Gakushuin over differences of opinion with the college administration—they moved to Japan's ancient cultural capital, Kyoto. There, Suzuki began teaching at Ōtani University. In 1921, Suzuki and Beatrice started The Eastern Buddhist Society, whose English-language journal, *The Eastern Buddhist*, remains one of the foremost periodicals in Buddhist studies. In the 1920s, Suzuki's many *Eastern Buddhist* articles were enthusiastically consumed by scholars in the United States and Great Britain; these, along with his groundbreaking *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927), made him internationally famous.

In 1936, Suzuki embarked upon a second "pilgrimage" to the West, principally to attend the World Congress of Faiths in London, but also to give lectures as a visiting scholar in several venues in Great Britain and America. While in London, Suzuki became acquainted with two men who would assist him heroically for decades to come in forming and propagating Zen Buddhism to the world. The first of these was Christmas Humphreys, a lawyer who ran the London Buddhist Lodge, and Alan Watts, a precociously intelligent twenty-year-old who became Humphrey's protégé and a devoted student of Suzuki's. Suzuki's goodwill tour of teaching and scholarly exchange solidified the favorable status of Zen in the English-speaking world, which survived, amazingly—given the degree of mutual animosity between Japan and the Anglo-American world—the dark years of World War II.

Suzuki spent the war quietly in Kamakura. Beatrice had died in 1939, and Suzuki, now in his seventies, had stopped teaching, although he continued to publish regularly in Japanese journals. Soon after the war, several eager young American Occupation officials familiar with his works went to Kamakura to pay respects to the old man in his retirement and encouraged him to reenter the cultural milieu. Among these men were Philip Kapleau and Richard DeMartino, both of whom (as Zen priest and psychologist, respectively) became leading figures in the popularization of Zen in the postwar era.

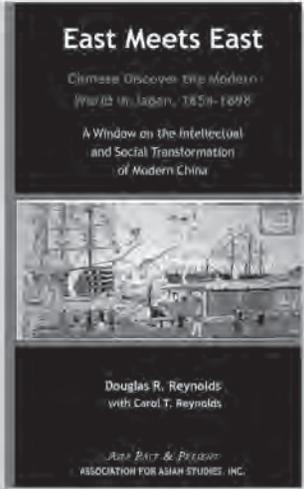
In 1949, Suzuki, now in his eightieth year, returned once again to the Western Hemisphere. He attended the East-West Philosophers' Conference in Honolulu and stayed on to lecture in at the University of Hawai'i for the fall and winter terms. He then taught Japanese Culture for a term

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at Claremont College, followed by teaching stints at several top-tier universities on the East Coast, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. In 1952, he was offered a visiting professorship at Columbia University, where he not only taught to standing-room-only crowds for several years, but also became the toast of New York's intellectual society. With his young personal secretary and assistant Mihoko Okamura at his side, he attended premier social gatherings, gave television interviews, and hobnobbed with the "in" members of the transatlantic intellectual elite. No snob himself, Suzuki also associated with a more low-brow crowd populated by students, artists, and beatnik poets. During his Columbia years, Suzuki established friendships and mentoring associations with figures as diverse as philosopher Karl Jaspers and popular novelist Jack Kerouac.

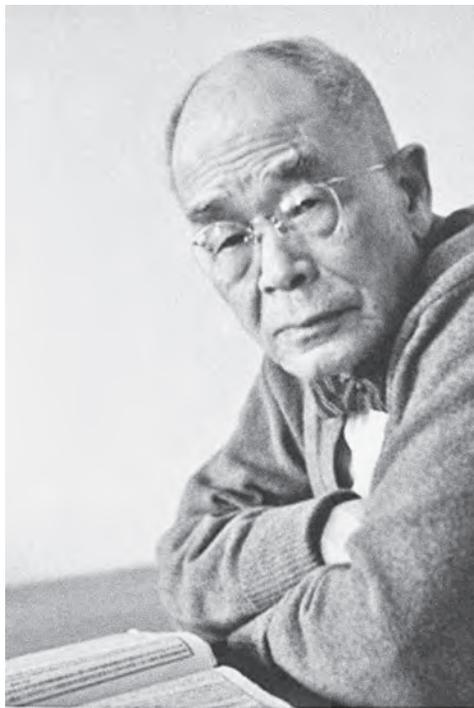
In between his teaching, lecturing, and media appearances in New York, Suzuki made several trips abroad, venturing to Europe and Mexico to lecture on Zen and its affinities with psychoanalysis, modern philosophy, and world mystical traditions. In 1958, he returned to Japan, having metamorphosed in the intervening years from a retired professor reasonably well-known in some intellectual circles to an international cultural celebrity. To a Japanese society whose former emperor worship was inextricably linked to military disaster that left a great suspicion of all things religious, Suzuki's fame overseas as a "master" of Zen—by no means the largest or most important sect in Japanese Buddhism—was something of a curiosity. While Zen was not a significant feature of mainstream Japanese life, Suzuki's positive international reputation was a prized asset as the nation worked to restore its economy, government institutions, and international standing after 1945.

Even in his late eighties, Suzuki exhibited sparkling vitality and a prodigious capacity for work. He continued to travel and publish, and edited works for the *Eastern Buddhist* up to the end of his life. He died in 1966 at the age of ninety-five, a venerated and much-loved teacher who not only personified for many the wisdom of Asian civilization, but knew how to communicate that wisdom with warmth, insight, and humor.

So what exactly was the "Zen" that Suzuki taught the world for nearly seven decades? In order to answer this question, we should begin by giving some characterization of the meaning of Buddhism itself and defining Zen as a particular practice distinct from "mainstream" Buddhism.

From the standpoint of religious history, Buddhism might be seen as an offshoot or even a reform of the Brahmanic religion of the ancient Indian world. The central figure of Buddhism (ie, the Buddha himself) was a prince named Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in present-day Nepal between the fourth and sixth centuries BCE. When the prince, who grew up in the luxury of his father's court, first saw diseased and dying people outside the palace walls, he was deeply moved and traumatized by the

For Suzuki, even the simple recognition that the world we see may not be "reality" was therapeutic and could be experienced by cultures as well as by individuals.



Source: Los Angeles Review of Books website at <http://tinyurl.com/ozf9j75>.

reality of human misery. Renouncing his name and inheritance, Siddhartha left home to live the life of an ascetic and to try to discover the meaning of—if not the answer to—the problem of suffering. Years of self-denial and yogic practices culminated in Siddhartha's experience of *samadhi* (J. *satori*) or "awakening" during a long meditation session, the result of which was his enlightened insight into the "four noble truths." These are 1) that life is suffering, 2) that suffering is caused by desire, 3) that suffering can be ended when desire is ended, and 4) that the cessation of desire can be attained through eight specific practices or attitudes of mind.¹ These practices, known as the "noble eightfold path" constitute the method by which a person can attain his or her own awakening and, possibly, enter into "nirvana," which is understood as "extinction," or final liberation from the necessity of being reborn into this world of suffering.

As Siddhartha (now the Buddha—"enlightened one") began to teach his new *dharma* or doctrine, he attracted disciples and his message spread, not only through India, but eventually into Central and East Asia. As is the case with almost any religious or philosophical system, followers began to divide into different sects and schools, depending on which portion of the teaching seemed most meaningful to them. The first significant division, which we can call the "Theravada-Mahāyāna" split, came within a few generations of the Buddha's passing from the earth. In its most general characterization, the Theravada "school" teaches that Buddhism is a monastic path, followed by consecrated elders who adhere closely to the teaching of the founder. The Mahāyāna school, for its part, is generally understood to be more universal, inclusive, lay-centered, and populist. While it retains the traditional Buddhist monastic structure, the Mahāyāna sects seek to reach out more consciously to lay folk as well. What has come to be known in Japan as Zen belongs to the Mahāyāna school and takes its name from the Chinese word *chan*, which in turn comes from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, which refers to the practice of meditation. Believing that meditation was the principal means by which the Buddha himself gained enlightenment, the Chan, or Zen, sect has always emphasized *zazen* (sitting meditation) as its core experience. The purpose of meditation in the Buddhist context is to quiet the

mind so that a person, becoming still and desireless, may enter into the same state of consciousness as the Buddha did when he attained awakening. This state is often called "the heart of wisdom" and appears as a "void," or, in the Japanese Zen lexicon, *mu*, "nothingness." For Zen Buddhists like Suzuki, the attainment of awakening allows a person to see the everyday world as an illusion, to transcend its false dualities and become free of the trap of the linear, logical thinking that holds the apparent world together. For Suzuki, even the simple recognition that the world we see may not be "reality" was therapeutic and could be experienced by cultures as well as by individuals.

As Chan Buddhism flourished in China during the sixth and seventh centuries, further splits occurred within the sect itself, chiefly the split into the Linji and Caodong schools, which differed in their understanding of how *satori* is attained. The Linji school came to favor the phenomenon of “sudden” enlightenment, while the Caodong preferred the path of slowly acquired, “gradual” enlightenment. When Zen made its way into Japan in the late-twelfth century, these schools (as Rinzai and Sōtō) were preserved and propagated through their respective monastic institutions. As Suzuki was trained at Engakuji, a Rinzai temple, his Zen was decidedly Rinzai as well. Accordingly, it has been argued—by supporters and detractors alike—that Suzuki’s teachings were tailor-made for the modern Western sensibility. If the attainment of enlightenment did not require commitment to a monastery or renunciation of everyday routines, one could conceivably “practice Zen” during work, after work, or while driving to work, and could theoretically attain *satori* as easily as making coffee or mowing the lawn. Suzuki himself never made such simplistic arguments, but the Rinzai tradition is filled with stories of monks who found immediate enlightenment after receiving insults from their masters, watching candles blow out, or working out the meaning of an especially difficult *kōan*. *Kōan*, a rich feature of the Zen tradition, are riddles or meditation themes, assigned by a master and intended to get the monk to break through the rational thought process. The most famous of these, perhaps, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is representative of the type. Any “answer” to the question lies outside logical thought and can only be reached by a flash of intuition, lending legitimacy to the notion of “sudden” *satori*. For Westerners seeking the convenience of “instant enlightenment,” the Rinzai Zen popularized by Suzuki was highly accessible, enriching, and even entertaining. In any event, the nonstructured structure of Zen was, to many “seekers,” a breath of fresh air compared to the stuffiness of bourgeois religion or modern secular rationalism. It is worth remembering that Suzuki himself was a layman and was never an “ordained” monk or abbot, thus his message was well-received by the ordinary middle-class consumer of popular philosophy.

Because Suzuki was really the only popular interpreter of East Asian culture for the greater part of a century, it was easy for his legion of disciples to simply accept his assumptions about Zen, religion, and culture. Among these assumptions, besides the preferential treatment of Rinzai Zen as *the Zen*—and Zen as *the Buddhism*—was an entrenched cultural nationalism that led him to imply the truth of such informal and unspecified equivalencies as “Zen is Japanese culture” and “Japanese culture is Asian culture.” Suzuki’s cultural chauvinism, considered innocently and acceptably exotic by Western devotees, was arguably part of a modern consciousness of Japanese uniqueness and superiority that helped foster Imperial Japan’s self-appointed mission to “save” Asia from the West. It was only revealed decades after Suzuki’s death that his body of work in Japanese contained a great number of jingoist, even racist, writings. While these would have been unremarkable to academic readers in prewar and wartime journals, they surely would have proved distressing to the beatniks and “arty” progressives who idolized him in the postwar era. In view of these more recent revelations of Suzuki’s scholarly project, some critics have suggested that his postwar career was largely a diluted continuation of an antimodern, antiliberal, essentialist celebration of Japanese spiritual values.

Other scholars have pointed out the shortcomings of Suzuki’s credentials as a “Zen master,” finding fault not only with his expressly lay-oriented approach to meditation and culture production, but also with his failure to look more deeply and sympathetically at the subtleties of the Sōtō tradition. It is inevitable, perhaps, that when one scholar maintains a virtual monopoly on interpreting a relatively unknown body of knowledge, a great backlash of opinion will result from the research of future rivals. As students, we have to consider all evidence carefully and judge scholarly arguments on their objective merits—and not on the gravitational force of the

pioneers who articulate them nor the critics who deconstruct them. Suzuki had his faults, but he never claimed the infallibility for which he is often condemned. In any event, it is fair to suggest that without Suzuki, there would likely not be any great departments of Japanese studies or Asian studies in Western universities today, and the number of Zen scholars available to reject Suzuki and his methodologies would be very small. The academic disputes in this case, like all specialized controversies, are in the long run incidental to the core fact that D. T. Suzuki—for better or worse—changed the vocabularies and the possibilities of an entire postwar culture.

To return to the opening claim of this article, which suggests that D. T. Suzuki may have been the single greatest contributor to the transformation of modern culture, I admit that it is a claim that needs some qualifying. While it is certainly not the case that the modern bourgeois West became “Zen” (a word that still evokes more than it concretely signifies) or converted en masse to Buddhism, it is hard to refute the notion that the modern bourgeois West has been in a nonstop discussion with itself since the end of World War II, trying to figure out how to become something other *than* itself. Suzuki and his “gospel” of Zen provided a way to talk about being that something else. The postmodernist, postcolonialist, post-Christian, posthistoricist yearnings of the so-called “critical project” all seem to be attempts by the modern Western world to become something “other.” As a representative of the recently defeated Japanese “other” to the victorious (yet arguably spiritually impoverished) West, Suzuki showed that there was a way through an oppressive reality that was theoretically *more* real—a “nothingness” that was not annihilation. Suzuki’s work, with its remarkable insights and culture-spanning qualities, brought the promise that the heavy weight of Western history could be lightened by the adoption of a new kind of consciousness. ■

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NOTE

1. One of the most common listings of the precepts of Noble Eightfold Path is as follows: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. The last of these, Right Concentration, points specifically to the necessity for *dhyana*, or meditation. See Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 45.

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