

ZEN IN AMERICA AND THE NECESSITY OF THE GREAT DOUBT: A DISCUSSION BETWEEN D.T. SUZUKI AND SHIN'ICHI HISAMATSU

The following are excerpts from a recorded conversation between Dr. D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) and Dr. Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1889-1980) in the winter of 1958. At that time Dr. Hisamatsu was a Visiting Professor at Harvard Divinity School. The conversation took place in Dr. Hisamatsu's room at the Hotel Continental in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dr. Suzuki's private secretary, Mihoko Okamura-Bekku and Dr. Hisamatsu's assistant, Jikai Fujiyoshi were also present. I would like to thank the Rev. Fujiyoshi for access to the recorded tapes, which were used in conjunction with the edited Japanese transcript (as found in Hisamatsu Shin'ichi Chosakushu, Vol. 8, pp.538-559) in making this translation. (J. Shore)

S: D. T. Suzuki

H: Shin'ichi Hisamatsu

To briefly summarize a few significant points made in the first part of the conversation: Dr. Hisamatsu begins by asking Dr. Suzuki a number of questions concerning Zen in America, such as; what do Americans understand Zen to be? What aspect of Zen are they interested in? What kind of people not only in America but throughout the world are interested in Zen? In response, Dr. Suzuki mentions among other things psychoanalysts' interest in Zen ----

S: When doing therapy the ordinary analyst can't pinpoint the patient's problem because the analyst merely uses analytic theory to go round and round the problem. On the other hand, the analyst who thinks a little deeper wonders how to get right into the problem. In other words, this kind of analyst comes up against the problem of the self, and that's really difficult. In this way such analysts become very interested in Zen.

In speaking of Krishnamurti (Jiddu: 1895-1986) Dr. Suzuki states that he has a rather independent standpoint, but while his "choiceless awareness" sounds Zen-like, it is not, and adds ----

S: Like in Zen, there's got to be activity, functioning. The Indians have a tendency not to go this far, but just to sit and teach their disciples. They talk about it, but (that's all).

Dr. Suzuki also mentions a Japanese Zen priest who was invited to France and ended up speaking of Zen as "the secret of Judo". This comment drew laughter. Dr. Suzuki concludes this part of the discussion with the remark, "But this is all superficial stuff."

Next Dr. Hisamatsu asks which of Dr. Suzuki's books are most widely read. An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, which includes a foreword by C.G. Jung, Manual of Zen Buddhism, which Aldous Huxley was reported to have said he would include among a handful of books he would take were he to live on a deserted island, and Living By Zen are mentioned.

The conversation then turns to how Westerners are vaguely interested in Zen but they just do not understand it, so they cannot formulate a real question or struggle with a koan. Dr. Hisamatsu asks how different the American people's understanding of Zen is from Dr. Suzuki's understanding, to which he responds ----

S: They're worlds apart. It's not even worth mentioning! (Laughter) Americans say they understand Zen or are interested in it, but with all of them this (understanding or interest) is not the real thing. They've got to make a leap beyond where they're at now and then see things from there. But they just can't seem to do it.

The reason psychologists are interested in Zen is that they want to know the psychological process to reach satori. Whenever I have the chance I try to tell them of our experiences and of the experiences of those in the past. But these experiences are all after the development of the koan. Hardly anything can be found concerning the experiences of people before the development of the koan, although the case of Rinzai (Gigen: Ch. Lin-chi I-hsuan, d. 866) is clear. Is there anyone else you can think of?

H: I think so too, but how about The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch,¹ or Obaku (Kiun: Ch. Huang-po Hsi-yun, d. ca. 850)? We don't know when "On the Lineage of Mind"² or "On Breaking through Form"³ were written.

S: Looking at The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch historically, (Hui-neng, who later becomes the sixth patriarch) heard the Diamond Sutra being recited, but nothing is written about how he Awakened afterwards. It simply says that after he asked about the Diamond Sutra he went to see the fifth patriarch. And after he got (there) it says he was put to work, but nothing is written about his inner experience. Such a thing is written about only in The Record of Rinzai, I think.⁵

.... The Koan really developed after Daie (Sōkō: Ch. Da-hui Tsung-kao, 1089-1163)⁶, but was the term "great doubt block" (大疑団, daigidan) used before him?

H: Hmmm. Great doubt block. It's in the work "To Encourage Zealous Study of the Zen Barriers"⁷ and the "Zenke Kikan" (禪家龜鑑), but what period works are they? The end of the T'ang (618-907) or beginning of the Sung (960-1279)?

S: Maybe so. But after all, when the koan came into use the term "doubt block" (疑団, gidan) was also being used. Before that point it seems the existence of this doubt block was not consciously realized.... In general the great doubt block has a strong connection with the koan.

H: Usually the term "doubt block" is used in connection with the koan, a doubt block concerning the koan. But actually in Zen there is the doubt block before satori, whether the term "doubt block" is used or not.

S: Yes. There has to be.

H: Yes. There must be. There's this doubt block and then it is broken through (破れる, yabureru) in an instant, or depending on the situation or mondo (exchange) it may coalesce in an instant. Then that doubt block which coalesced in an instant is broken through. Then there can be satori. The term "doubt block" doesn't matter, but the fact is, in Zen it is the basis (基, moto) of satori, the way toward (經過, satori).

In the case of the sixth patriarch, leaving aside the historicity of the incidents and just looking at what has been written; when he was selling firewood and heard the recitation of the phrase (from the Diamond Sutra) "Without having any place whatsoever to dwell, you should have your mind arise", he had a realization.⁸ It struck him. But this is what eventually became a doubt block for him and grew bigger. Then when he was with the fifth patriarch that (doubt block) was clearly dissolved (解けた, toketa). That dissolution made clear that "Without having any place whatsoever to dwell, you should have your mind arise" is "not a single thing" (無一物, mu-ichi-motsu).⁹ That's one way of interpreting it, I think. Leaving aside the scholarly research of what has actually been recorded.

S: Historical research is difficult. There are two versions of this incident. (In one version) the fifth patriarch called the sixth patriarch at night and read to him and spoke to him and then the sixth patriarch Awakened. I wonder how people in the Zen sect nowadays understand this? He was Awakened again!

H: That was when he had it clearly verified, I think.

S: Yes. That's all it was.... You don't have to use the term "doubt block" here, "great doubt" (大疑, daigi) can be used if you like. It's where you're completely cornered. Everyone has to get to this point.

H: It's got to be a fundamental (doubt). An ordinary doubt won't do. Your whole being your entire body and mind as it says in the Mumonkan¹⁰ must be that doubt; otherwise it cannot be called a doubt block. It means completely devoting yourself to this (doubt).

How about Tokusan (Senkan: Ch. Te-shan Hsuan-chien, 780/2-865)? He was so confident of (his understanding of) the Diamond Sutra. But when he met that old woman he had his confidence knocked right out from under him and he fell into an enormous doubt block. Then when he was with Ryutan his doubt block was really broken through. Then he threw away everything he had accumulated up until then because it was all useless. This is where he was reborn. Through this I think we can see his so-called psychological workings and that he Awakened because he had this doubt block.¹¹

In other religions it's often the case that one stops doubting and just believes. In Zen, however, doubt must be taken all the way. Furthermore, this is not like Descartes' intellectual doubt, but a doubt with one's entire being.

S: Looking at Shakyamuni's practice: first he had a dualistic understanding, but he got nowhere with it, then he tried austerities, but because he was still concentrating on a goal he ran into a dead end. Finally he had no choice but to struggle on within the doubt block or great doubt: "What do I do?!" People afterwards have said that Shakyamuni then thought, "This time if I don't break through I won't get up from this seat." But we really don't know whether Shakyamuni actually sat with such a thought as to break through or not. He just sat with this "What do I do?!" we can see that as an historical fact or we can see it from the fact of our own psychological processes (心理的経過, shinriteki keika). Just sitting like this for one week is what is now called a sesshin. And then with the self-presentation of the great doubt (大疑現前, daigi genzen) Shakyamuni saw the light of the morning star. It can just as well be the sound of the wooden board being struck at the monastery (to announce the time of day). But there's got to be something that kind of touches you or strikes you. Without it you're just stuck there. It's got to come out from someplace deeper than your unconscious. Without this something kind of touching or striking you there's no real Awakening. This is what I always say.

Dr. Hisamatsu also questions Dr. Suzuki on whether he has been asked about Zen and its relation to social ethics. Dr. Suzuki replies that he has and that Westerners are very concerned with this. Dr. Hisamatsu then asks Dr. Suzuki if he has been asked about Zen's connection with warfare since Zen was once connected with the way of the warrior. Dr. Suzuki again responds affirmatively and explains that he has been asked how it is that Germans like Heidegger (Martin, 1889-1976), who it is said were

connected with the Nazis, could also be interested in Zen. Dr. Hisamatsu interjects that this is a big problem not only with the Germans but with the Japanese themselves who encouraged war; and with the many right wingers who practiced Zen. Dr. Hisamatsu continues ----

H: Therefore the connection between Zen and ethics must be made very, very clear. Namely, while Zen transcends ethics, if it only transcends it, ethics will not come out of it. An ethics which transcends (ordinary ethics) must come out of Zen.

S: I say that too, but because they don't understand this transcending they always separate (Zen and ethics). For example, they can't understand returning to ethics or social life after transcending them, or that this social life itself is Zen. Because of these misunderstandings other things can be tried such as zazen, but after all words are still needed (to explain).

H: But this ethics which naturally comes out of Zen is different from ordinary ethics and even shows the point which ordinary ethics can't reach. Zen must be clarified concerning this point. Among the many people you've met or heard of (in the West) is there anyone who you think has some understanding of Zen?

S: No one. Not yet anyway.

H: I see. Not yet. Well then, is there at least someone you have hope for? (Laughter)

S: No. Not even that.

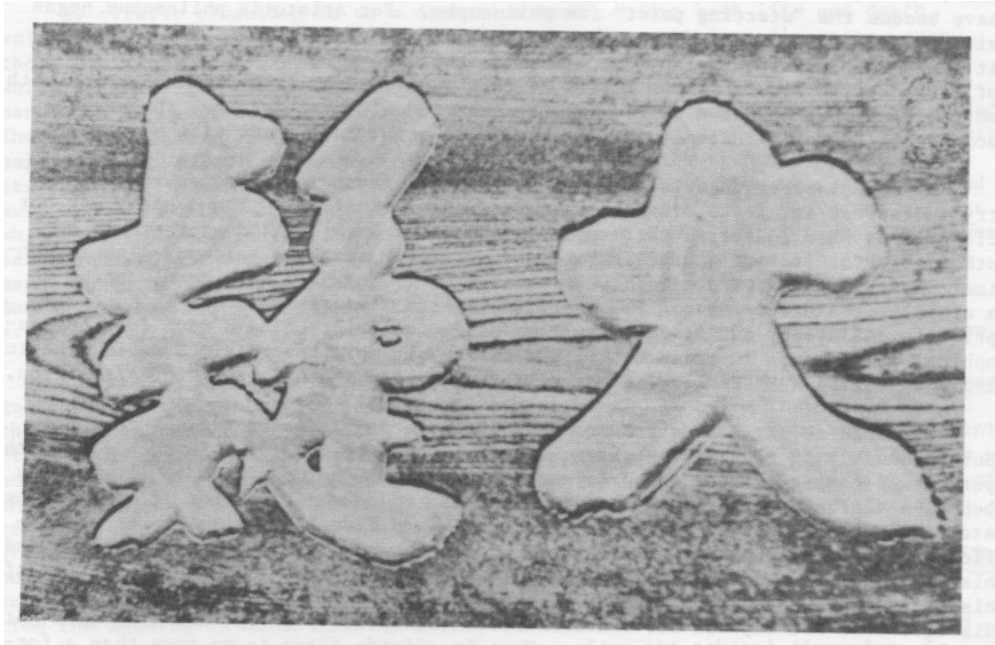
H: So, of the many people (in the West) who have written about Zen there aren't any who understand it?

S: That's right.

H: Well, is there at least some book written (by a Westerner) which is at least fairly accurate?

S: No. Not to my knowledge... Other people don't ask me to criticize (these writers) so I don't, although De Martino's always saying to me "Tell' em. Tell' em." (Laughter) But I have many other things I want to write.... Kapleau was quite interested (in Zen training); what's he up to?

H: He's been practicing hard for some time and in that sense I admire him. But then he doesn't seem to know how to go about practicing. He had been going to Hosshinji but recently he hasn't been going. That's a problem. Without firmly established modern Zen methods of practice even people who come from the West to Japan to practice just can't do it sufficiently....



大疑, daigi "great doubt"

Carving in wood of Hakuin Ekaku's (1686-1769) calligraphy. Hanging in the Ryutakuji Zen Monastery in Izu.

Footnotes

1. See The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, Philip B. Yampolsky (tr.); Columbia Univ. Press.
2. Ketsumyaku ron (Ch. Hsuen-mo lun) Attributed to Bodhidharma. See Zen Dust, Miura and Sasaki; Harcourt, Brace and World, pp. 398-399.
3. Hasō ron (Ch. P'o-hsiang lun) Also attributed to Bodhidharma. See Ibid.
4. See The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, pp. 126-128.
5. See The Record of Rinzai, Ruth F. Sasaki(tr.); The Institute for Zen Studies, Kyoto, Japan, pp.50ff.
6. See Zen Dust, pp. 13ff.
7. Zenkan Sakushin (Ch. Ch'an-kuan Ts'e-chin) See Zen Dust, pp.341-342, 316.
8. See The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, p.94 fnote. and pp. 126-127.
9. See Ibid, p.94 and p.132 fnote.
10. See for example Zen Comments on the Mumonkan, Zenkei Shibayama: Harper and Row, pp. 19, 27-28.
11. For these incidents of Tokusan see Ibid, pp.201ff.