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## Masao Abe: D. T. Suzuki's Legacies and an "Academic Dharma Lineage" in North America

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Professor Abe is generally regarded as the torch bearer of D. T. Suzuki. But how did that come about? This essay sheds light on the relationship between Suzuki and Abe.

Abe's professor, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, had come to know Suzuki through his mentor Nishida Kitarō. Suzuki was one of Nishida's closest friends. It appears that Hisamatsu's and Suzuki's cordial relationship became closer after Nishida's death in 1945. Hisamatsu in turn was the link for Abe to come to know Suzuki. Abe recalls his first encounter with Suzuki, which took place in the winter of 1947, when Suzuki was in bed with a bad cold and Abe was sent by Hisamatsu to make a sick call on his behalf. Abe was then Hisamatsu's teaching assistant (*joshu*). Seeing Suzuki in person for the first time, Abe could not help but feel the unique spiritual presence of this man. At that time, Abe, though a committed follower of Pure Land Buddhism, was deeply troubled with his spiritual quest. Perhaps sensing Abe's agony, Suzuki gave him a copy of his imperial lecture *The Essence of Buddhism*, in which he had treated Zen and Pure Land thought as sharing the same Mahayana roots.<sup>1</sup>

Abe's second visit to Suzuki came in the spring of 1949, when Suzuki was preparing to leave for the United States to spend "the rest of his life in order to bring the message of Zen Buddhism" to the West. At that time Abe was to convey Hisamatsu's concern that Suzuki ought to remain in Japan and contribute to internationalizing Zen by translating Zen texts into English, for, in Hisamatsu's mind, there was no one better qualified than Suzuki to carry out that task.<sup>2</sup>

Suzuki was ready to make a bold move, however. Having witnessed Hiroshima-Nagasaki, he was convinced that the message of wisdom and compassion based on the awakening to the "true self" that Zen speaks of was an effective and necessary antidote to the egocentric mindset, which manifested also as national ego-centrism, rampant in the post-World War II world. He was convinced that the message of awakening and compassion would give the humanity a better chance at peace. In fact, by the early 1950s, with the intensification of the Cold War and the turmoil in Korea, there was a palpable fear that World War III might break out any day, and Suzuki certainly shared that ominous sense.<sup>3</sup>

## ZEN MUST ADOPT NEW EXPRESSIONS

Suzuki left for the United States on June 16, 1949, to attend the Second East-West Philosopher's Conference and to teach at the University of Hawai'i in the summer and the fall semesters. Through his interaction with Western and Asian thinkers at the conference as well as with his students at the university, he came to feel strongly that (1) it was important to emphasize compassion (*hi*) in the face of an excessive Zen emphasis on the koan practice, (2) Zen Buddhists must develop their "logical" expression to articulate Zen teaching in language understandable to Westerners, and, in this connection, (3) it was incumbent on him to introduce the thought of Nishida Kitarō to the West. In Suzuki's own words, "Contemporary Zen is short of compassion (*hi*). Therefore, it lacks the momentum to engage society and work from within it. Again, it lacks a logical discourse (*riron*). This is something Nishida always used to say. In order to make Western thinkers understand Zen teaching, one must have a logical system (*ronri*)."<sup>4</sup>

These three points are clearly present and developed in Abe's works. In his introduction to *Zen and Western Thought* (1985), Abe wrote that (1) Zen embraces a profound philosophy (echoing Suzuki's concern for the necessity for logical articulation), (2) the ultimate in Zen and in Buddhism is "absolute Nothingness" or "Emptiness" (echoing Nishida's philosophy), (3) Buddhism is a radical realism and a compassionate way of life (echoing Suzuki's concern for compassion), and (4) a new cosmology, not a new humanism, is needed in the global age.<sup>5</sup> By "cosmology" Abe meant—as I understand him—a system of thought that embraces humanism but goes beyond that of the human-centered perspective, which again echoes Nishida's philosophy. But how did Abe come to embrace Suzuki's mission as his own?

## SUZUKI'S STUDY IN NEW YORK

Hisamatsu and Suzuki had numerous conversations about the necessity of nurturing Japanese Buddhist scholars who could function in the international arena. In 1954, upon Hisamatsu's request, Suzuki wrote a letter of recommendation for Abe, who was applying for a Rockefeller Foundation Grant.<sup>6</sup> After receiving the fellowship Abe affiliated with Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary. During his stay in New York (1955–1957), Abe sat in on Suzuki's lectures at Columbia every week and called on him quite regularly at his lodging place at the Okamuras' on West 94th Street. Abe recalls, "There he would give me personal instruction and I could listen to him talk in a more informal atmosphere. On these occasions Suzuki Sensei would tell me from time to time something about his personal motivations [behind his coming to the United States]."<sup>7</sup>

While in New York, Abe handled various matters for Suzuki and Hisamatsu as their liaison. After the scholarship ended in the spring of 1957, Suzuki wrote to Hisamatsu on June 2, 1957: "The day before yesterday, Mr. Abe got on a plane and left for London. He was here [in New York] for some time and we often saw each other. But now that he is gone, I somewhat feel lonely. And most essentially, the

communication line with you is now gone. Therefore I'm writing this letter to you."<sup>8</sup> In the 1950s, Americans and Europeans interested in Zen practice went to Suzuki for assistance around living and practicing in Japan. Hisamatsu, and Abe after he returned to Kyoto, helped people referred by Suzuki.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear now that it was Abe's close association with Suzuki in New York that fundamentally shaped Abe's scholarly mission. Like Suzuki, Abe formulated Zen philosophy in language understandable to Western thinkers. Sharing Suzuki's wish, Abe translated Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* and taught seminars on Nishida's thought. Following Suzuki's lead, Abe engaged in dialogue with Western thinkers, including Tillich and Heidegger. Abe especially carved a niche in North America, where distinguished theologians came and joined in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Many of those who presented comments about Abe at the roundtable sponsored by the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies were touched by Abe in one way or the other and in that sense formed Abe's "dharma lineage" in North America. And beyond the academic world, Abe left other important legacies, having sponsored non-Japanese interested in Zen monastic life.

#### ABE AND THE KYOTO SCHOOL THINKERS

I will always remember professors associated with the Kyoto school of philosophy for their generous hospitality. They shared a tradition of welcoming and meeting with interested students and scholars, especially those from overseas. It was Professor Abe who introduced me to Professors Nishitani and Ueda. I am certain that this attitude of remarkable *accessibility* on the part of Kyoto philosophers was a key factor in encouraging foreign scholars to become familiar with their works. The task of how to cast Zen (and broader Buddhist) thought in a language communicable to Westerners still remains an unfinished task, and in this respect our endeavor continues.

#### NOTES

1. Masao Abe, "Memories of Daisetz Suzuki Sensei," in Masao Abe, ed., *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York, Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986), 215–216.

2. *Ibid.*, 217.

3. For instance, see Suzuki's letter no. 472 to Furuta Shōkin, from Ontario, CA, September 7, 1950, *Suzuki Daisetsu Zenshū* (The collected works of Suzuki Daisetsu, hereafter *SDZ*) 29:500; also letter no. 500 to Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, from New York, April 16, 1951, *SDZ* 29:530–531.

4. Suzuki's letter to Akizuki Ryōmin, February 7, 1951, from New York. Compiled in Akizuki Ryōmin, *Sekai no Zensha, Suzuki Daisetsu no Shōgai* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1992), 256.

5. Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. William LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985), xxi–xxiii.

6. Letter no. 678 to Hisamatsu, June 9, 1954, *SDZ* 30:34.

7. Masao Abe, "The Influence of D. T. Suzuki in the West," in *A Zen Life*, 114.

8. Letter no. 882 to Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, June 2, 1957, *SDZ* 30:248.

9. See letter no. 968 to Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, October 23, 1958, *SDZ* 30:342.