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**Intuitive or Intellectual?:
Zen's Connection to *Bushido* According to D.T. Suzuki**

Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki (1870-1966) was a Japanese Zen monk, scholar, and writer of various influential works about Zen Buddhism. Over his lifetime, Suzuki witnessed many pivotal changes both within Japan and regarding Japanese-global relations. Of course, this tumultuous historical context deeply informed the content of his publications. Suzuki was born in 1870, just following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. By the time he turned 30, he had already witnessed the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, the Japanese invasion of Taiwan, the annexation of Korea. In 1896, Suzuki had published his first book, *Shin shūkyō ron* (新宗教論, A New Theory of Religion), and claimed to have his first enlightenment experience (Victoria 98). In this first book, we read of the relationship between Zen and the State, a theme Suzuki much expands on throughout his career. One of his works, “Zen and the Samurai” in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, published in 1938, helped to re-introduce the connection between Zen and *bushido*, “the way of the warrior”, to both the Japanese and international public. Although at the time of publication, samurai had been abolished over half a century ago, the Japanese state necessitated a resilient and compliant soldier population as a once expanding global power in between wars. In 1938, Japan had already entered the Shōwa era and began to invade Chinese territory, in both Manchuria (successfully) and Inner Mongolia (unsuccessfully). Japan was also in the midst of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Needless to say, a physically small, but expanding empire had a great interest in propagating loyalty to the State in its constituents.

To Suzuki, *bushido* can be understood through a Zen Buddhist framework. I agree in a certain capacity. Morally, Zen diverges from non-Mahāyāna Buddhism and operates as more value-neutral. In this way, Zen's indifference towards morality has allowed elites to utilize Zen as a tool of sowing loyalty to the State amongst the people, practically since Zen's original conception. Philosophically speaking, however, I find the Zen framework incompatible with *bushido* ideology; Suzuki's rationale for their connection is predicated upon problematic understandings of intuition and *anātman* (non-self). Though Suzuki argues that Zen appeals to the samurai class morally rather than philosophically (Suzuki 61), I contend that the philosophical component of Zen is critical to its identity. An amoral Zen without Zen philosophy is simply apathy.

From even the 8th century, Zen had been criticized for its lack of moral standards. For example, a famous Chinese writer, Liáng Sù (753-793), provided the following critique: "Those who travel the path of Ch'an go so far as to teach the people that there is neither Buddha nor Dharma, and that neither good nor evil has any significance... Such ideas are accepted as great truths that sound so pleasing to the ear" (Chen 357). Value-neutrality has long since been a marketable tenet of Zen. Naturally, those who seek to rationalize conventionally immoral behaviors such as exploitation or warfare would be drawn to a tradition that has colloquially accepted value-neutrality. Indeed, from the Sòng dynasty (960-1279) onwards, early Zen leaders in China maintained amiable relations with their imperial leaders; these leaders would give Zen masters honorable titles and vestments, and in return, Zen masters would pray for the prosperity and well-being of the State (Victoria 126-7). Zen was not only used as a tool to rationalize the imperial court's own behavior amongst themselves, but to promote loyalty to the State among their constituents. Prior to the introduction of Zen to Japan by the monk Eisai (1141-1215),

Buddhism was already accepted by the Japanese imperial court. Tendai Buddhism, which Eisai was originally trained in, was the most dominant form of Buddhism in the Heian era (794-1185). During this time however, Japan was experiencing a sort of religious and moral degeneration; it was largely believed that Buddhism was “dying”, so to speak, as substantiated by *mappō*, the Buddhist teaching of the Final Dharma age (Welter 64). When the monk Eisai travelled to China, he was introduced to Zen Buddhism, and saw it as a cure for the spiritual degeneracy he experienced in Japan. Although rejected by the leaders of the Heian establishment, the new military leaders of the Kamakura (1185-1333) *shōgun* would eventually accept Zen, following Eisai’s proposal, *Treatise on Promoting Zen for the Protection of the Country*. In the second half of this text, Eisai discusses how Zen can “protect the country” through “invoking divine assistance and protection” (Welter 70). Clearly, Zen had long been established as a tool

In the chapter “Zen and the Samurai”, in his 1938 book, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, D.T. Suzuki argues that Zen appeals to the samurai class morally. For the most part, I agree with this assertion. Historically, as I have demonstrated, Zen has been accepted by the ruling class and its moral neutrality has been critiqued for over a thousand years. Furthermore, the practice of Zen meditation is generally understood as a value-neutral practice. This sentiment can be illustrated through a quote from Lt. Col. Sugimoto Gorō (1900-1937), a Zen practitioner and a celebrated Japanese war-hero. He wrote, “The Zen that I do is not the Zen of the Zen sect. It is soldier Zen... Through my practice of Zen I am able to get rid of my ego. In facilitating the accomplishment of this, Zen becomes, as it is, the true spirit of the imperial military” (Victoria 115). Brian Daizen Victoria explains that Sugimoto was arguing that *Zen meditation* was what allowed him to rid himself of his ego, as demonstrated by his use of the word *zen* (禪), meaning “meditation”. While this is an apt example of *Zen* meditation, Victoria argues that it is *not*

Buddhist meditation, to which I am inclined to agree. A quote from one of Buddha Śākyamuni's disciples illustrates the types of meditation that Buddha did *not* praise: "He [who] dwells with his thought obsessed by ill-will, and does not comprehend as it really is the escape from the ill-will that has arisen; he, having made ill-will the main thing, meditates on it, meditates absorbed, meditates more absorbed, meditates quite absorbed... The Lord does not praise this kind of meditation" (Walshe 1987). Essentially, meditation that focuses on "ill-will", is to be criticized using a Buddhist framework, and in my opinion, antithetical to Buddhism itself. If Buddhism claims that the three *kleśas* (desire, aversion, and ignorance) bring about bad karmic fruit ("Buddha"), how can meditation obsessed with warfare possibly be Buddhist? Furthermore, Zen Buddhism (and other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism) have no equivalent phrase for the five mistaken types of *samādhi* (meditation). Ultimately it appears that Zen has diverged from Buddhism in this way.

While Zen meditation may be accepted as value-neutral, discussion of ethics (or more specifically, intent) appear in prominent Zen texts. In Buddhism, *karma* (action) and *phala* (karmic fruit) are determined by an individual's intentions. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy writes, "[*Karma* is] said to be of three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. The Buddha insists, however, that by action is meant not the movement or change involved, but rather the volition or intention that brought about the change" ("Buddha"). The principle of "intent over action" is exemplified in a famous *kōan* in the *Sayings of Jōshū*. In this anecdote, a monk comes to the Zen master Jōshū (778-897) for his opinion concerning a dog and Buddha-nature.

A monk asked Jōshū whether a dog had the Buddha nature or not. He said "No!"

The monk said, "All creeping things with life have the Buddha-Nature; how can it

be that the dog had not?” Jōshū answered, “You are attached to thoughts and emotions arising from karmaic ignorance.” (Blyth 22-3)

Although seemingly nonsensical at first, taking into consideration the intention of both the monk and Jōshū provides clarity. When Jōshū replies “No”, he is not answering the monk’s question, but he is instead speaking to the monk’s *intent* in asking. Specifically, he is rejecting the monk’s differentiation between himself (or humans) and the dog, an act of conceit. Clearly, both in Zen and in traditional Buddhism, intent is regarded with great importance. Therefore, when one is meditating in order to obtain mental power for battle (*zenjōriki*) or rejecting selfhood to become one with an imperial power, the Zen Buddhist framework does not seem to fit the “way of the warrior” (Victoria 123).

Furthermore, in my opinion, Zen Buddhism also cannot be understood without considering it philosophically. Although in “Zen and the Samurai”, D.T. Suzuki emphasizes Zen’s moral tradition as the primary connection between Zen Buddhism and *bushido*, he still incorporates more philosophical elements into his argument. I find that Suzuki’s understanding of *anātman* (non-self) and intuition are insufficient and poorly demonstrate a supposed philosophical relationship between Zen and *bushido*. In Buddhism, *anātman* (non-self) describes the belief that while individuals conventionally exist, ultimately the idea of the “self” is just a concept composed of five changing psychophysical elements (ie. form, emotions, etc.). Part of becoming enlightened is accepting the ultimate reality of impermanence and straining from conceit: the idea that there is an “I” or a “mine”, as illustrated in the aforementioned *kōan* (“Buddha”). However, Suzuki and likeminded thinkers understand *anātman* very differently. Suzuki misinterprets *anātman* by regarding it as *mindlessness* rather than non-self. In his text, Suzuki

cites a dialogue between the National Teacher, Bukkō Kokushi (1226-86) and Hōjō Tokimune (1251-84), a member of the Hōjō clan during the Kamakura *shogun* reign. Tokimune came to Bukkō, seeking to escape his own cowardice. In order to do so, Bukkō tells him that he must reject his sense of self by shutting out all of his thoughts (Suzuki 65-6). This perception of *anātman* is useful for the military class Zen advertises to because it endorses mindless killing. Samurai (and simply soldiers later on) are meant to shed the emotional barriers that would, for any human, make killing difficult. Of course, this is not what Buddhism promotes.

The Buddha instead taught “middle path” or “middle way” which calls for individuals to “[reject] an assumption shared by a pair of extreme views” (“Buddha”). Although Buddha acknowledged the difference between conventional and ultimate realities, he argued to delegitimize the suffering and pain individuals feel in the conventional world. One may argue that Zen, as divergent from Buddhism, can wholly reject the relative world for the sake of the ultimate. I find this troubling, considering how deeply Suzuki and his supporters cling to other conventional arbitrary truths. Delineating who is an ally or an enemy; who is Japanese and who is a foreigner; who is my superior and who is my *kohai*—these distinctions are meaningless in a world that renounces conventional truths. However, Suzuki clings to these distinctions as if they were ultimately true. Victoria describes the combination of these ultimate and relative worlds rather eloquently, “Zen leaders in Japan, Suzuki included, have effectively collapsed these two truths into one undifferentiated reality, thereby providing Bushido with a corrupted metaphysical foundation” (118). Thus, in order for his logic to make sense, Suzuki must subjectively choose which of these conventional realities are worth acknowledging.

Secondly, similar to the notion of “mindlessness” Suzuki posits that *bushido* fits within a Zen foundation, because both battle and Zen are intuitive behaviors. To this I argue that in fact,

neither of these activities are intuitive and indeed necessitate a large amount of mental preparation to be done properly. Suzuki has a habit of loosely applying intuition to behaviors that he believes fit within Zen. For example, he does this when endorsing the concept of “Zenlike gardening”, assuming that individuals have some sort of intuitive, artistic vision for “Zen” gardens that they can execute instantly, with ease. Kuitert, author of *Themes, Scenes, and Taste in the History of Japanese Garden Art* argues this instead:

Anyone who has handled garden stones knows that you cannot arrange them by intuition. It is an intellectual process of mentally if not actually moving and matching—searching for an aesthetic effect and technical perfection that requires quite a lot of artistic consideration, not to mention physical force. (133)

Suzuki erroneously makes this assumption with Zen and *bushido*, as well. While becoming enlightened allows for one to “know” as all previous Zen masters did through direct transmission, I find that the act of studying Zen is hardly an intuitive one. Even if it were true that becoming enlightened provided one with complete intuition in any range of topics, I expect that the large majority of samurai or soldiers were Zen masters. Zen study itself prompts students to concentrate on difficult concepts, like finding the “answers” to *kōan*, for example. *Bushido* is hardly intuitive either. However, Suzuki writes in “Zen and the Samurai” about the simple and non-intellectual mind of the samurai (62). He also makes several references to the “mindless” quality of battle, where samurai ought to fight without thinking, or without training, as in one anecdote he cites. In this dialogue, the swordsman Yagyū Tajima no kami Munenori talks to a personal guard of the *shōgun*. The guard asks Munenori for training, but Munenori insists that he

is *already* a master. Thus demonstrating to the reader that battle is not someone one must be trained in nor equipped for, but is intuitive for samurai (70-1). Here, I must ask then—*why* do samurai fight? Samurai do not fight in wars because there is an innate quality about them that drives them to warfare. Japanese warfare during the early 19th century was predominantly offensive; in general, these were not defensive battles. Behind the scenes, there are elites and military generals meticulously deciding what territories to encroach on and attempt to seize. Mass propaganda campaigns and repression of political dissent must be orchestrated, and psychological warfare is in no way intuitive. Samurai have learned to identify political enemies and rationalize murder through these deeply intellectual affairs. Warfare is an inherently intellectual, philosophical phenomenon. Ironically, later in “Zen and the Samurai”, when Suzuki speaks of Tokimune’s success in battle, he does not cite his intuition to fight, but rather his *planning*. He writes, “It was not with courage alone with which Tokimune accomplished the greatest deed in the history of Japan. He planned everything that was needed for this task, and his ideas were carried out by the armies engaged in the different parts of the country to resist the powerful invaders” (67). Of course, as aforementioned, the encouragement for samurai and soldiers to both refrain from thinking and join battle without having formal training is ultimately part of a clear political agenda, rather than being practical for success.

D.T. Suzuki’s “Zen and the Samurai” demonstrated to me that *bushido* can only fit within a Zen framework if all philosophical aspects of Zen are left unconsidered. Even then, the components that can fit into this understanding of Zen, while derivative from Buddhism, cannot be understood as *Buddhist* at all. While Suzuki was successful in re-establishing Zen to promote loyalty to the Japanese State and develop a compliant, self-sacrificial soldier community, I find that *bushido* is principally incompatible with Zen Buddhism as a whole. The connection between

Zen and *bushido*, despite their long history with one another, appears to be artificially crafted for an obvious agenda—to serve the needs of empires and colonial powers—rather than being fundamentally intertwined.

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