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Paper Proposal “Reflections on DT Suzuki: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of His Death”

D.T. Suzuki’s Influence on Monastic Memoirs

Though recent years have made us more aware of Daisetz Suzuki’s enormous influence in configuring the western reception of Zen, few projects have looked at how he conditioned the experiences of westerners studying Zen in Japan. Nevertheless, memoirs reporting these experiences were essential in confirming and perpetuating Suzuki’s ideas, and the Zen they portray is heavily influenced by his work. I argue that these memoirs need to be understood not as historically reliable accounts of monastic life, but as a type of utopian narrative, where “utopian” maintains its well-known ambivalence as a “good” but also “non-existing” place. Such narratives feature an outsider (a non-Asian person born in Europe or the United States) as our guide in exploring the utopia of the Japanese Zen monastery. Erasing the complexity of this historical space, the monastery is cast as a good place, serving the function of a perennial experience called *satori*. Yet because such spaces have only a tenuous relationship to historical reality, they are non-existing places as well.

My paper demonstrates the utopian nature of monastic memoirs in two steps. First, I show how two famous introductions to Zen Buddhism, Phillip Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen* and Robert Aitken’s *Taking the Path of Zen*, reproduce Suzuki’s ideal of Zen. Second, I turn to two accounts that differ significantly from Kapleau’s and Aitken’s. Janwillem Van de Wetering’s *The Empty Mirror* and David Chadwick’s *Thank You and Ok!* provide more nuanced interpretations of Suzuki, where the utopian monastery is found to be irreconcilable with the monasteries where the protagonists of these memoirs find themselves. In this circumspect manner, Van de Wetering and Chadwick critique representations of Zen life that follow Suzuki. I conclude by proposing that these more critical texts nevertheless continue Suzuki’s lifelong project of making Zen accessible to the western world. They achieve this by pointing out the complexities of cross-cultural discourse even while maintaining the importance of Zen ideas and practice. Throughout the paper, I not only draw upon recent work within the field of utopian studies, but also use Sara Ahmed’s work to critically interrogate notions of happiness found in these memoirs.

By examining Suzuki’s influence on western memoirs of monastic life, we can gain insight into the assumptions that continue to affect our thinking about Zen today. For example, the focus on meditative experience that characterizes these memoirs and Suzuki’s work can also be discerned in the discourse of the mindfulness meditation movement. Because Zen continues to be one of the preeminent representatives of East-Asian spirituality in the West, understanding the problems and possibilities of its representation remains of great importance to the fruitful continuation of cross-cultural dialogue.

Biographical note

Ben Van Overmeire obtained his PhD in Literature from the University of California, San Diego, in 2016. He studies how Zen Buddhist koan can be analyzed as works of literature, and how koan have affected thinking on Zen Buddhism in the twentieth century. Accepted and forthcoming publications include “Inventing the Zen Buddhist Samurai: Yoshikawa Eiji’s *Musashi*

and Japanese Modernity” (in *The Journal of Popular Culture*) and “Portraying Zen Buddhism in the Twentieth Century: Encounter Dialogues as Frame-Stories in Daisetz Suzuki’s *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* and Janwillem Van de Wetering’s *The Empty Mirror*” (in *Japan Studies Review*). Currently, he is working on a project analyzing Daisetz Suzuki’s relationship with Westerners residing in Japan during the period 1945-1966.