COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

A Belated Response to Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki

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In the April 1953 edition of *Philosophy East and West,* Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki published their debate on the history and method of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism.[1] A year later, Van Meter Ames presented his response to their debate by arguing that Zen is like pragmatism; he did this to defend Hu Shih's approach and to "tone down" what he referred to as Suzuki's "transcendentalism."[2] Van Meter Ames analyzed their debate on two points. First, he saw it as a split between schools or worldviews when he typified Suzuki as a Buddhist who finds transcendentalism in the Zen masters, as opposed to Hu, the pragmatist, who finds naturalism in them. Second, Ames said that their debate was a matter of "emotional tone" concerning "that subtle aspect of truth which is not so much a matter of fact as of taste."[3] He devoted most of his article to an attack on Suzuki's work for explicit and implicit contradictions.

In 1955, Arthur Waley presented his short response to the debate.[4] Ames had imposed "pragmatism" on Hu; Waley had imposed "religion" on Suzuki. Ames tried to resolve the debate; Waley saw the two positions as necessary polarities: "If there were no Hus there would be no Suzukis."[5]

In this review, I renew the discussion to show that both Hu's and Suzuki's respective positions have their shortcomings, especially in their criticisms of each other. I will not recapitulate their articles. I focus my arguments on four topics: (1) Ch'an versus Zen, (2) the irrational and arational, (3) history and historiography, and (4) knowledge versus *prajñā*-intuition.

I. Ch'an versus Zen—A Case of Equivocation

It is clear that Hu and Suzuki are in disagreement, and it is also clear what they are disagreeing about. What Ames, Waley, and I have trouble grasping is: why are they disagreeing when many of their positions overlap or depend on each other? Sometimes in a debate one discovers contradictions that, upon careful study and clarification, turn out not to be real contradictions, or the debate is groundless. Often these misunderstandings arise because of a shift in the meaning of a word or phrase. In this case the equivocation concerns the meaning of the term "meditation" (Skt *dhyāna*) or rather the Chinese "character" *ch'an* (Jpn *zen*).

When Hu uses the term "Ch'an" (especially with a capital "C"), he means the Ch'an Buddhist sect of China, usually that of the T'ang dynasty. But Hu also uses the term "ch'an" to mean *dhyāna* or meditation.

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With this distinction in mind, Hu's statement that Shen-hui started "a new Ch'an which renounces *ch'an* itself and is therefore no *ch'an* at all" (p. 7) is made clear. This is no Ch'an paradox or contradiction. Hu simply means that the Ch'an school of Shen-hui rejected sitting meditation (Chin *tso-ch'an*, Jpn *zazen*), and this is not meditation (*ch'an, dhyāna*).

Suzuki's use of the term "Zen" is not as consistent as Hu's. Depending on the context, Suzuki means various things by "Zen." Van Meter Ames points out that for Suzuki: "Zen is life," that is, "everything that goes into the make-up of life" (p. 20). And Waley has shown Suzuki's Zen to be "like ... religious experience" (p. 75). Suzuki does use the term "Zen" to refer to the school of Buddhism that developed in T'ang China, but he often uses it to mean other things as well. Sometimes the term "Zen" functions as Suzuki's mantra or as his "one word" (*yi chu tzu*), which neither affirms nor denies. In his response to Hu, Suzuki clearly states that he is *not* talking about the historical Zen school. Suzuki wants to discuss "Zen as Zen apart from its historical settings.... Zen in itself, or Zen as each of us lives it in his innermost."

The problem lies in Hu using Ch'an (Zen) to mean the T'ang school of Buddhism, and Suzuki using Zen (Ch'an) to mean the enlightenment experience or the emptiness from which *life* swells. Hu is discussing the history of Ch'an; Suzuki is discussing the religiophilosophic significance of the Zen experience. They are discussing two different matters. Thus, I contend that because of their different usages of "Ch'an," they are not debating or talking with each other; rather they are talking in opposite directions. Because of their disparity, they do not actually rebut each other.

They accuse each other of holding positions which they do not actually hold. For example, Hu accuses Suzuki of saying that one cannot understand the history of Ch'an—when in fact Suzuki is not talking about history but about the Zen experience. Suzuki accuses Hu of not being qualified to discuss Zen in-itself, but this is not Hu's project. Hu wants to discuss the history of the Ch'an school, not the Zen experience. Suzuki appears to be saying that if he were Hu's Zen master, then he would not give Hu the Mind-seal.

Suzuki's proposal that Hu is unqualified to discuss Zen in-itself is based on his distinction between two different types of mentality: one that understands Zen and one that does not. Van Meter Ames holds that this distinction "is an intellectualistic-conceptual dichotomy foreign to Zen" (p. 20). From the perspective of the Zen experience, Ames would be correct, for the Zen experience would not hold such a distinction—we all have Buddha-nature within us. But are not the Zen tradition and its many schools based on the distinction between the enlightened and the nonenlightened, between the one who "understands," has *prajñā*-intuition, or lives Zen and the one who does not? Suzuki has not com-

mitted an error in holding this distinction. But does he have the right to rebut Hu this way? Isn't Suzuki committing the fallacy of arguing against the man ad hominem? Hu does not have to be enlightened to discuss the history of Ch'an (Zen). One can discuss the history of a number of religious traditions without being a member of them, let alone a consummate member. Hu's and Suzuki's original misunderstanding of what the other means by Ch'an (Zen) generates other confusions.

II. The Irrational and the Arational

Hu begins his article by expressing disappointment with Suzuki and his disciples for stressing the idea that Zen is illogical, irrational, and beyond our intellectual understanding. Hu claims that since one can discuss and understand the history of Ch'an in China, it is therefore understandable.

There are two problems here. First, Hu is committing a category error in that he confuses what is said about Zen with what Zen is. In other words, just because one can have a rational discussion of something and come to have an understanding of it, it does not follow that the thing discussed and understood is itself rational. One can discuss mob behavior and come to an understanding of it, but this does not make such behavior rational. Second, Hu criticizes Suzuki for the wrong reason; that is, his attack on Suzuki does not get at the root of the problem of describing Zen as illogical or irrational. It seems to me that describing Zen as illogical or irrational is a misunderstanding not of Zen, but of the nature of the illogical and the irrational.

The problem as I see it is "What sense does it make to speak of the logic of the illogical," just as in ethics it does not make sense to speak of the morality of immorality? The immoral, like the illogical, is everything opposed to the moral, or logical. However, Suzuki and others do speak of Buddhist philosophy and logic, Zen philosophy and logic, or *prajñā* logic. If Zen is "illogical," it would make no sense to speak of "Zen logic" because that would be a logic of the illogical, which would not be a logic in any sense. Although Zen is opposed to conventional modes of thought or is antilogical, this does not make it illogical or irrational. Following Toshihiko Izutsu, I would describe Zen as *alogical*.[6] In this sense one could have a metalevel discussion of the "logic" of the alogical. The "logic" of the alogical would be a metalogic. This is the case with Zen. Zen is definitely antiphilosophical and antilogical; however, one can discuss the metaphilosophy or metalogic of the aphilosophical or alogical approach of Zen. Both Hu and Suzuki have misrepresented "Zen," for it is neither logical nor illogical, but alogical.

Because of their misunderstanding, Hu is claiming that one can understand the history of the Zen school; Suzuki is claiming that the Zen experience is beyond the ken of human understanding. As Waley pointed out, both of them take their positions to unnecessary extremes.

Hu goes too far with his rationalism in claiming that the *kung-an* (Jpn *kōan*) has a rational meaning (p. 77). On this point, Suzuki's criticism of Hu is well taken; Hu, like a Zen novice, attempts a rational explanation of the *kōan* and misses the point. Suzuki goes too far in considering himself a "sinner" for making historical sense out of Zen, "for apart from the mundane (the world of history) there is no transcendental (Zen-experience)" (Waley, p. 78).

III. History and Historiography

Following Suzuki's own testimony, both Ames and Waley discuss his problem with history. However, they do not attempt to reconcile it. Ames would agree with Suzuki that he and Hu are "sinners" if they use history to dispel misunderstanding when history cannot have the final word. Ames only attempts to solve the problem for Hu by claiming that Hu, like any pragmatist, can have the "pure experience" of Zen (p. 20). Waley points out Suzuki's shortcomings as a historian, and he goes on to claim that Suzuki's "attitude that Zen is 'above historical facts' (is not) really a Zen attitude" (p. 76). Waley wants to reconcile the problem by showing that it is Suzuki's personal bias against history that leads him to make this distinction, such that Suzuki and Hu become necessary polar opposites like the mundane and the transcendent, the infinite and the finite, the historical and the transhistorical.

I think that I can resolve the problem for Suzuki by drawing a distinction between "history" and "historiography." Commonly when one speaks of history, one usually means historiography, that is, the art and science of writing history. It is important to keep in the mind the philosophical concept of history as a cultural tradition by which a people understand and interpret themselves. "History" in this sense is a rich concept; it is not the mere objective study of events in the past; it is the living tradition of a people. History is alive, and in this sense the "historian" is anyone who contributes to the living understanding or self-realization of a people. Historiography, on the other hand, contributes to *history*, but the negative qualities are ascribed to it. For example, the simple objectivity or objectification, a concern only for the past and the dead and so on, which Suzuki ascribes to "history," can be seen as characterizing the narrow interpretation of "historiography," the scientific academic discipline of history. In the following quote from section 4, it appears that Suzuki is not against the concept of history as the living tradition of a people, but rather he is opposing the sterile activity of the academic historiographer:

> I say, "Zen Lives." History shuns anything living, for the living man does not like to be grouped with the past, with the dead. He is altogether too much alive for the historian, who is used to digging up old, decayed things from the grave. (*Studies in Zen*, pp. 153–154)

Clearly Suzuki is not discussing the philosophical concept of history, and I doubt many historians, academic or otherwise, would agree with Suzuki's description of history—it is an emotional description that makes the study of history sound like grave robbing. If we can accept the philosophical concept of history as "living history," then "living Zen" could not be distinguished from the "living history" of Zen. There can be no timeless Zen, or if there is such an independent timeless Zen, then it is nothing more than an empty term that has been reified. This is similar to Waley's point that there is no transcendent Zen without the mundane history of it.

In his essay "Zen and Buddhism," Abe Masao approaches the problem of the historicity and the ahistoricity of Zen Buddhism from a different angle.[7] First, Abe points out that Zen both is and is not a *form* of Buddhism. That is, it is a form of Buddhism in that there is a "traditional Zen sect" that, historically speaking, developed during the sixth century in China and spread to Japan. On the other hand, Zen is not a *form* of Buddhism in that it is the fundamental nature or basic source from which the different *forms* of Buddhism arise (p. 235). In contrasting the Buddha and the Christ, Abe points out a fundamental paradox or form of identity through contradiction, which clearly illustrates the codependence of the historicity and the ahistoricity of Zen. Abe contends that

> What is essential to Buddhism is not Siddhartha's historical existence, but the Dharma he realized. This characteristic of Buddhism is clearly expressed in the well-known passage, "Regardless of the appearance of the Tathagata (Sakyamuni Buddha) in this world, the Dharma is always present." (P. 237).

This is the ahistorical nature of Buddhism—Dharma or *Zen in-itself.* This does not mean that the historical Buddha, Siddhartha, does not have a special position in Buddhism. As Abe argues: "It may be said that he is the *first* person who awakened to the Dharma and who thereby became the Buddha" (p. 237). In this sense, Dharma or Zen in-itself is historical in that without the historical Buddha's enlightenment, or at least *some* historical Buddha's enlightenment, the Dharma would not be taught, or, more fundamentally, it would never be experienced at all. Although the Dharma is ahistorical, existing apart from historical people, nevertheless it is only historical people who can experience the Dharma. Thus, the Dharma is always *expressed* in and through *history.* We experience the timeless from our time-bound perspective.

The Dharma or Zen in-itself is the *living history* of Buddhism—the enlightenment or Zen experience. This position is implicit in Suzuki's response to the extent that he is part of the *living history* of Zen which bases itself on Hui Neng's experience that meditation (*dhyāna, ch'an, zen*) is one and the same with *prajñā* (enlightened wisdom). On this point Suzuki is well aware of his historical analysis and debt to Hu as a

(*living*) historian. When Suzuki claims that Hu does not deal with Zen in-itself or the living ahistorical Zen, Suzuki is attacking Hu for the wrong reason. It was never Hu's project to discuss Zen in-itself distinct from its history.

IV. Knowledge versus *Prajñā*-Intuition

A good portion of Suzuki's response to Hu is centered on his criticism of Hu's translation of *chih* as "knowledge" as opposed to Suzuki's translation as "*prajñā*-intuition." This may be Suzuki's strongest criticism against Hu, though it is grounded historically in his interpretation of *chih* in Hui Neng and his disciple Shen-hui. It is interesting to note that Soothill's *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* gives "knowledge" or "to know" as the basic translation of both forms of *chih*, and it is taken to be a translation of the Sanskrit *vijñāna*—relative discriminatory knowledge. *Prajñā* is usually rendered into Chinese as *po-ju*. One must keep in mind that Hui Neng was illiterate and not aware of the finer aspects of the translation of Buddhist Sanskrit terms. It is common in Chinese for one term to be used with both positive and negative connotations, where the difference in meaning is carried by the context. In Hui Neng's teachings, *chih* should be understood as *prajñā* and not *vijñāna*; it is not discriminatory knowledge, but rather it is the wisdom of enlightenment, *prajñā*-intuition. For this reason, Suzuki is right to criticize Hu's translation.

This difference in translation is not just a matter of "emotional tone," as Van Meter Ames would have it, for Hu is clearly making a translation error and generating a misunderstanding by not clarifying the basic *vijñāna/prajñā* distinction that is so fundamental to Buddhism. It is also the basis for the distinction between the enlightened and the non-enlightened. This helps to explain why Ames misinterprets Suzuki's distinction of the two types of mentalities. Hu's mistranslation of *chih* as "knowledge" is not only evidence of his lack of understanding of Zen in-itself, as Suzuki would have it, but it also reflects his incomplete understanding of the historical value and meaning of Hui Neng's reforms because Hu misrepresents Hui Neng's teachings on *prajñā* by interpreting it to be *vijñāna*. It is this misunderstanding on Hu's part which leads him to his excessive rationalistic interpretation of Zen, especially of the *kōan* and the *mondō*.

Hu's misunderstanding of *chih* in Ch'an also leads him to characterize the Ch'an method of teaching in rational and intellectual (*vijñāna*) terms. Thus, as Suzuki points out, Hu misinterprets *pu shou p'o* (do not tell outwardly) to mean "never to tell plainly," as if the life experience or the enlightenment experience could be accurately described by the teacher who holds back for the sake of the students' learning experience. As Suzuki criticizes: "I wish he would remember that there is something in the nature of *prajñā*-intuition which eludes every attempt at in-

tellectualization and rejects all plain speaking, so called" (*Studies in Zen*, p. 159). Hu compounds his misinterpretation by citing Chu Hsi, the Sung dynasty synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism, to back up his interpretation of Ch'an's teaching method. Oddly enough, Hu also seeks his Ch'an example of *pu shou p'o* from the Sung Ch'an master Fa-yen (d. 1104). His case could be strengthened if he could find examples within the context of T'ang China—that is, if he would stay within the historical limits of his article. Hu, then, rationalizes the alogical nature of Zen statements as eccentric and only seemingly meaningless. Finally, Hu sees the period of traveling on foot, the life of a monk, in protoscientific terms, as illustrated by Chu Hsi. Hu overlooks the very paradox of this "method," namely that the disciple is traveling about looking for what cannot be found, trying to learn from various teachers what cannot be taught, trying to hear that one, essential teaching or word that cannot be spoken.

At times their debate lapses into personal attacks on integrity and scholastic ability, and it is difficult to believe that they maintained their friendship afterwards. In the end, they both must accept full responsibility for the confusion they have generated. Hu is the instigator of it by not understanding that, for Suzuki, the term "Zen" is in no way confined to the coincidence that it also refers to the "traditional Zen sect." Suzuki keeps the fires burning by accusing Hu of misrepresenting *Zen in-itself*, something Hu never proposed to do. Although Suzuki's argument would benefit from a philosophical understanding of "history," nevertheless his criticisms of Hu's overly rationalistic interpretation of Zen are well made.

Finally, we see that neither Hu's nor Suzuki's position can be narrowly confined to only one side of a dualism, for example rational versus irrational, history versus religious experience, and so on. Standing on their shoulders, we discover that the historicity and the ahistoricity of Zen, or the religious experience, is a basic paradox of the temporality and the atemporality of life and of experience. This displays the meta-ontology of the enlightenment experience: fundamentally it is simultaneously timeless or atemporal, and yet experientially it is only discovered by the time-bound people who live and die. From the Zen perspective, Hu's, Suzuki's, Ames', Waley's, and my own respective discussions fall short in that none of them presents that "one expression" that truly opens the way of *ZEN*.

Notes

1 – Hu Shih, "Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism In China, Its History and Method," *Philosophy East and West* 3 (1953): 3–24; and D. T. Suzuki, "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih," Ibid., pp. 25–46. A summary of Hu's article and all of Suzuki's reply are reprinted in *Studies in Zen*, ed. D. T. Suzuki

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(New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 129–164. My citations of Suzuki are from this reprint.

2 – Van Meter Ames, "Zen and Pragmatism," *Philosophy East and West* 4 (1954): 19–33.

3 – Ibid., p. 19.

4 – Arthur Waley, "History and Religion," *Philosophy East and West* 5 (1955): 75–78.

5 – Ibid., p. 78.

6 – Toshihiko Izutsu, *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), pp. 156 ff.

7 – Abe Masao, "Zen and Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 3 (1976): 235–253.