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Zen, Suzuki and the Art of Psychotherapy

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“[T] here is an unmistakable and increasing interest in Zen Buddhism among psychoanalysts” (Erich Fromm, 1960)

In the 1950s, Japanese Zen Buddhism exploded on the American cultural scene. Zen is the Japanese name for a tradition of Buddhism whose practice began in China under the name of Chan. It claims to eschew textual authority and scholastic training in favor of practices designed to facilitate direct and spontaneous access to the knowledge of the world as given, free of all preconceptions (though there is a significant textual and quasi-scholastic tradition associated with this claim!). In the early 20th-century, few knew what Zen was and even fewer cared (it was -- in the words of a later journalist -- 'a subject of which even an informed person need not be ashamed to know nothing' (Heard 1950)). However, in the postwar United States—traumatized by fascism, haunted by specters of nuclear apocalypse and increasingly alienated from its own institutionalized religious traditions—this practice suddenly seemed to offer a form of anti-authoritarian, unchurched spirituality that many people had been craving.

For some, it also promised something else: something that, on the face of it, should seem more surprising: a set of tools for the psychiatrist, a set of insights for the psychoanalyst, a kind of psychotherapy by other means. By the 1960s, it had become commonplace in certain circles to describe Zen as a kind of “Eastern” psychotherapy, to compare the relationship of the Zen master and his adept to that of the psychoanalyst and his patient,

and to ask questions about the psychotherapeutic function of Zen riddles (*koans*) like 'what is the sound of one hand clapping?' By the 1970s, people were suggesting that some schizophrenic patients might be best seen as thwarted Zen mystics, and invoking Zen language in new politicized forms of psychotherapy designed to expose the hypocrisies of modern society. And by the 1990s, the idea of Zen as a psychotherapeutic practice had become part of the background furniture of American culture. In 1998, a Japanese priest and psychotherapist puzzled over the fact that many Westerners 'regard the temple to be a kind of therapy center and the Buddhist priest to be a type of psychotherapist.' None of the Japanese people who came to the temple, he added, thought about Zen that way (Imamura 1998: 229).

It would be worth our cultivating a sense of puzzlement as well. How did Zen come to be so widely understood as a form of psychotherapy by Eastern means? And why does this therapeutic understanding of Zen seem to be a Western, even an American understanding, that is not shared (for example) by Japanese adherents of the tradition?

A few straightforward answers suggest themselves at the outset. Zen arrived in the United States at a moment when the culture was both deeply preoccupied with its own mental health, and persuaded (partly through the recent war experience) that talking cures—Freudian-inspired forms of therapy—represented the most profound and effective way to minister to troubled and disordered minds. Drugs existed, but the couch (metaphorically speaking) was king (see Hale 2001).

This fact matters, but it does not, in itself, explain how Zen came to be seen as interesting or valuable for the American psychotherapeutic project. After all, orthodox Freudian theory had, since the 1920s, openly expressed distinct skepticism and disinterest towards

all things Eastern and “mystical.” Freud himself had set the tone for mainstream views on the matter in his 1929 book, *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he had suggested that all mystical experiences had roots in infantile experiences of subjective merging with the world and especially the mother (see Freud 1961). They had no inherent higher spiritual meaning or value. As he put it in a letter to his friend, the biographer and novelist Romain Rolland (who had first encouraged him to take an interest in these experiences):

We seem to diverge rather far in the role we assign to intuition. Your mystics rely on it to teach them how to solve the riddle of the universe; we believe that it cannot reveal to us anything but primitive, instinctual impulses and attitudes—highly valuable for an embryology of the soul when correctly interpreted, but worthless for orientation in the alien, external world (Freud 1992, p. 393; see on this point also Harrison 1979; Werman 1977).

From this rather discouraging beginning, things had only gotten worse. Some students of Freud went beyond dismissing mystical experience as a form of infantile regression. They declared it an induced form of psychotic withdrawal, akin to schizophrenia or autism! (see Ben Avi 1959). As late as 1976, the psychoanalytic Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry could still conclude:

The psychiatrist will find mystical phenomena of interest because they can demonstrate forms of behavior intermediate between normality and frank psychosis; a form of ego regression in the service of defense against internal or external stress; and a paradox of the return of repressed regression in unconventional expressions of love (cited in Deikman 1976 <http://www.deikman.com/gap.html>).

Given this, why would any psychotherapist take a positive interest in an apparently mystical system like Zen? To understand, we need to realize further that the postwar period was not just an age of Freud; it was also—for some—a time of intense recalibration of the actual value of orthodox Freudianism. The unique anxieties and pressures of the time were such, some people began to say, that it was no longer enough to just focus on

helping patients to tame their unruly unconscious minds. Haunted by the specter of atomic devastation, burdened by the drive to conform, produce and consume at all costs, many modern patients—it was said—suffered from problems that were far more existential, social, and even spiritual in nature than in the past. Psychotherapists needed to respond by conceiving of therapy in a new way—less as a means of curing mental illness (a medical model) and more as a way of addressing the supposed root causes of patients’ spiritual emptiness, anxiety and alienation (an existentialist-humanistic model) (for more, see Grogan 2008; Engel 2008; Herman 1995).

Why would any of these humanistic psychotherapists conclude that Zen had something to contribute to their project? The short answer is: because they were all being exposed to a form of Zen that had already been partially psychologized and Westernized for them. This Zen was, to a first approximation, the product of the long-lived and highly prolific Japanese translator and teacher of Zen, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.

That is the short answer. The long answer is more interesting because it plunges us into a far more contingent and nuanced story that unfolds over some seventy years and involves many other actors: Soyen Shaku, Beatrice Lane, Paul Carus, Carl Gustav Jung, Karen Horney, Harold Kelman, Erich Fromm, Alan Watts, Gregory Bateson, R. D. Laing, and more. Later, a number of these figures would describe the dialogue with Suzuki as an encounter between the spirit of the East and the spirit of the West, between spirituality and science, between ancient intuition and modern rationality (see, for example Fromm and Suzuki 1970.)ⁱ In reality, however, everyone involved in this dialogue was modern, everyone had mixed allegiances to science and spirituality alike, and everyone invoked the categories of “East” and “West” in different ways in order to advance different agendas.

The Psychological Education of D.T. Suzuki

To see how this all worked, we must start by looking more closely at Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. For a generation of Western spiritual seekers in the 1950s and 1960s, he seemed the essence of the Oriental teacher of ancient wisdom (Iwamura 2010: 27-28).

His books on Zen Buddhism were experienced as catalytic and mind-bending by millions. They also shaped the creative and scholarly works of some of the most important and cutting-edge artists, writers, theologians and philosophers of the 20th-century, including Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Thomas Merton, John Cage, and the 'beat Buddhists'—Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder.

And yet many of those who felt they owed the most to Suzuki hardly knew him. The fact is, behind Suzuki's inscrutable Oriental public image was a thoroughly modern man who had lived for many years in the United States, had traveled widely in Europe, was married for many years to an American woman, and was as thoroughly conversant with Western philosophy as Eastern.

The real Suzuki was also a man who, alongside his deep study of Japanese and Chinese texts and traditions, had spent decades—especially in the first half of his life—becoming deeply conversant with the latest Western psychological theories. Those years of self-study were critically important to his development of a way of talking about Zen that would ultimately draw the attention of some of the leading psychoanalytically oriented therapists of the day. It was almost surely not Suzuki's original intent, however, specifically to catalyse a dialogue between Western psychotherapy and Eastern Zen. What role then *did* his long-standing engagement with Western psychology play in his own thinking? The short answer is: psychology was the language of universality and modernity; and if Zen was to survive, Suzuki

believed, it needed to learn to speak that language. That is the short answer, but we now need the long answer to make sense of it.

Suzuki's long life stretched from the 1870s to the 1960s. This meant that he came of age during a time when the very survival of Buddhism in Japan seemed at risk. In the late 19th century, the newly established Meiji government in Japan had declared Buddhism a 'foreign' and corrupt tradition that was incompatible with its own modernizing and westward-looking goals (see Sharf 1993). Suzuki's teacher, the Zen Buddhist abbot Soyen Shaku, was among those actively seeking strategies in those days for preserving the tradition. In particular, he and others invested considerable time in efforts to distil the rational 'essence' of the Japanese Buddhist tradition, while downplaying or dismissing all the accreted cosmologies and folk rituals that might make it appear superstitious or retrograde (see Shokin 1967).

Suzuki was deeply aware of all this work, but initially was not himself involved in it.

However, because he had good English language skills (before becoming Soyen's student, he had earned a modest living as an English teacher), Soyen one day enlisted him in a bold strategic effort: he asked Suzuki to translate into English a talk that he, Soyen, planned to hold at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, in 1893 (see Switzer 1985).

The Parliament—held to coincide with the World's Fair in Chicago—was the first time that leaders and representatives from all the major world faiths had ever gathered together to exchange views. For many of the American organizers of the Parliament, the gathering was an opportunity to reaffirm the primacy of the Christian faith in a time when developments in Biblical criticism and the natural sciences (especially Darwinian evolution) had put it increasingly on the defensive.

In contrast, the Japanese delegates—and other representatives of Asian countries—viewed the Parliament as an unprecedented opportunity to showcase the modern relevance and even superiority of Buddhism over Christianity in an international forum (see Snodgrass 2003). As an 1893 editorial in a Japanese Buddhist journal bluntly observed shortly before the start of the Parliament: there is 'distress among Christians conscious of the destruction of the basis of their faith by the forces at work in civilization. Here,' the editorial concluded, 'is hope for Buddhism'" (cited in M. J Verhoeven 1997: 353; for more generally on the Parliament, see Eck 1993).

Soyen – who was well-educated in Western philosophical and scientific ideas—therefore pulled no punches in his talk. He drew parallels between the Buddhist 'law of karma' and the 'laws of nature' studied by science. He made clear that Buddhists believed that everything happens for a reason. He underscored that they had no need for miracles and no appetite for blind faith.

This reverse missionary work to the West succeeded, at least in one very important respect: it converted the German-born philosopher and editor, Paul Carus to the cause. Carus was one of those many late 19th century intellectuals who had been devastated by the loss of the Christian faith of his youth, and who had committed his adult life to trying to create some kind of alternative religion that would be compatible with the new truths of science. Though he had never shown any serious interest in Buddhism before 1893, Soyen and other Buddhists who spoke at the Parliament convinced him that the tradition offered a far more powerful framework for realizing his vision of an integrated approach to science and religion than Christianity or anything else on offer in the West.

And it happened that he was remarkably well-placed to do something about this conviction.

He was the son-in-law and partner of the philanthropist Edward Hegeler, who in 1887 had established a publishing house, the Open Court Publishing Company, and two journals, the *Open Court* and *The Monist*, both dedicated to reconciling religion with modern (especially Darwinian) science. Carus tapped into the family coffers to help Soyen and another young Buddhist scholar, Anagarika Dharmapala, tour North America. He also invited Soyen and another Japanese Buddhist scholar to spend a week with him in his home, discussing their shared interests in purging religion—Buddhism and Christianity equally—of all “mythological” elements (Verhoeven 1997). In short order, guided by Soyen, he wrote a book entitled *The Gospel of Buddha*, published by the Open Court Press (see Carus 1894; Jackson 1968). Soyen promptly asked Suzuki, still back in Japan, to translate Carus’ English-language book into Japanese for Asian audiences, which he did.

Around this point in time, the thought arose that Suzuki might come to the United States in order to help Carus with more translation work. Soyen reassured his American friend that Suzuki was 'honest and diligent', and though 'not yet thoroughly versed in Buddhistic literature, yet I hope he will be able to assist you' (cited in Leonard 1995: 153). Suzuki, for his part, was keen both to experience the West for himself, and to learn from Carus. Three years later, in 1897, he arrived in La Salle, Illinois. He stayed there for eleven years. During this period, he worked on a series of translations for his employer, and assisted in all aspects of the publishing and editing business (see Shōjun 1967).

At the same time, he began a process of diligent self-education in Western philosophy and psychology. A key discovery was the work of William James, especially James’ philosophy of radical empiricism, in which he insisted that direct, unmediated experience should be the foundation of knowledge of reality, and his efforts to theorize the psychology of mystical

experience. James had identified four universal 'marks' of a mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transience and passivity. In his own later writings, Suzuki would engage with James, almost as if with a colleague, by suggesting that “the psychology of satori” (Zen enlightenment) could be characterized by eight further markers: irrationality, intuitive insight, authoritativeness, affirmation, a sense of the beyond, a feeling of exaltation, momentariness, and an impersonal tone. This last characteristic, Suzuki felt, distinguished Zen mysticism from Christian mysticism, which often involved 'personal and frequently feelings (Suzuki 1956: 106).

Suzuki did not limit his psychological education to James. During the years that he was working for Carus, *The Monist* published scores of articles or reviews concerned in one way or another with the new psychological theories of the 'subliminal self' (a term associated especially with the English psychical researcher Frederic Myers, but also adopted by James) ; the 'subconscious' (widely used, though given particular specificity by the French psychologist Pierre Janet); 'unconscious cerebration' (associated with the English physiologist and philosopher William Carpenter); and the 'unconscious mind' (widely associated at the time, not with Freud, but with the 'philosophy of the unconscious' of the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann). Carus himself published pieces in *The Monist* in which he spoke often about 'the subconscious treasury of our mind', 'the subconscious depths of our soul', and more (see, e.g., Carus 1902).

Suzuki's own early writings directed to Westerners showed a casual confidence with the gist of all these early 20th century discussions:

Some think that there is still an unknown region in our consciousness, which has not yet been thoroughly and systematically explored. It is sometimes called the Unconscious or the Subconscious. This is a territory filled with dark images, and

naturally most scientists are afraid of treading upon it. But this must not be taken as denying the facts of its existence. Just as our ordinary field of consciousness is filled with all possible kinds of images, beneficial and harmful, systematic and confusing, clear and obscure, forcefully assertive and weakly fading; so is the Subconscious a storehouse of every form of occultism or mysticism, understanding by the term all that is known as latent or abnormal or psychic or spiritualistic (Suzuki [1921] 1961: 32).

By 1907, his last year working with Carus, Suzuki was secure enough in his knowledge of modern Western psychology to suggest in print that all the most important insights of modern psychology already existed in Buddhism. 'It is wonderful,' he wrote, 'that Buddhism clearly anticipated the outcome of modern psychological researches at the time when all other religious and philosophical systems were eagerly cherishing dogmatic superstitions concerning the nature of the ego' (cited in Lopez, 2011: 220).

If this was so, then it followed that there might be a way to apply Western psychological categories as a strategy to teach Buddhism—and soon he would conclude, especially Zen Buddhism—to Westerners. This would be his project for the next 40 years.

First, though, he needed to complete his psychological education. Leaving the United States in 1908, Suzuki spent a year in Europe doing research in libraries, and finally returned to Japan in 1909, where he secured work teaching English at an elite grammar school (he would not secure a professorship in his area of scholarship until 1921). At the request of the London Swedenborgian Society, he also undertook a series of translations of several key works of the 18th century Swedish scientist, traveller, statesman, and religious philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg; he then capped off this translation work with a biographical study of the man.

These years of work added a further—more overtly mystical—level of complexity to Suzuki's psychological approach. Swedenborg believed that the human mind consisted of

levels, parts of which are engaged with the visible, material world and parts of which have the capacity, through intuition, to access invisible realities. Part of the task of spiritual development was to cultivate the generally less developed, intuitive levels of the mind. Historian Eugene Taylor is emphatic about the importance of the Swedenborgian worldview to Suzuki's intellectual development: 'There can be little doubt that the writings of Swedenborg...defined for Suzuki the standard by which he would first introduce Zen to the west—namely, not as a religion but as a spiritual psychology that had obvious and practical consequences' (Taylor n.d., in *Studia Swedenborgiana* 1974-2006). Indeed, Suzuki would implicitly endorse Taylor's appraisal when, as an old man, he is reported to have suddenly exclaimed to a group of fascinated Western scholars (including Mircea Eliade and Henri Corbin): 'For you Westerners, it is Swedenborg who is your Buddha, it is he who should be read and followed!' (Ankerberg 1999, p. 442; also Suzuki et al. 1996: p. xv. See also Zuber 2010).

In 1911, Suzuki had married an American woman he had met while living in the United States: Beatrice Erskine Lane. Lane—who moved to Japan to be with him—was a graduate from Radcliffe College (where, as it happened, she had studied with William James), and also a passionate Theosophist. Theosophy was the 'New Age' occult philosophy of its time: it blended a certain reading of the latest scientific ideas with a mix of Eastern and Western mystical and gnostic traditions, all in pursuit of the universal truths behind all religions. It also explicitly framed itself as a *psychology*—a 'science of the soul' that aimed to counter the materialistic and nihilistic academic psychologies of the late 19th century (see Blavatsky 1896). Theosophists were intensely interested, for example, in evidence for telepathy, clairvoyance and other paranormal psychological abilities. They believed these

abilities were scientifically-validated signs of humanity's progress towards a state of what they called 'cosmic consciousness.' For Theosophists, in short, it was possible to be scientifically-minded, psychologically-minded and spiritually-minded at once—there was no intrinsic contradiction between any of these levels of understanding. Suzuki—who was active with his wife in Theosophical Lodges in Japan for decades—seems to have taken this message to heart

In 1921, the couple co-founded (with several colleagues) an English-language journal *The Eastern Buddhist* dedicated to teaching the universal and essential truths of Buddhism to Westerners, in a language that they could understand and accept. Some scholars have suggested that the journal was modelled in spirit and structure after Carus' *The Monist* (see Jackson 2010: 43). In short order, Suzuki began to use this journal as a vehicle for most of the articles on Zen that would later make his reputation in the West. In 1927, a London publisher began to publish some of them in collected form. Suzuki's reputation began to grow.

The Zen education of Western psychology

The story we are tracking, though, took a decisive turn when, in 1933, Suzuki decided to send the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung one of his collected volumes of essays. For some years, he had admired Jung's mystical and expansive vision of the human mind. Quite possibly, he even had Jung in mind when he declared in an article first published in 1921 that 'the study of Zen must be taken up by the profounder psychologists' (Suzuki 1961: 32).

Jung, it turned out, had already read Suzuki's previous collection of essays. He needed no persuading of the interest of Suzuki's work for his own. His warm response was flattering indeed:

Zen is a true goldmine for the needs of the Western "psychologist." ... My acquaintance with the classical works of the Far East has given me no end of support in my psychological endeavors. Thus I feel deeply obliged to you for your kind and generous gift (Jung, September 23, 1933 in Alder 1973: 127-128).

Six years later, in 1939, Jung agreed to write a foreword to the German translation of Suzuki's first book directed at a general audience, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*.ⁱⁱ 'It is no accident that it is a psychotherapist who is writing this foreword,' Jung observed there. Zen might initially seem like 'mumbo jumbo,' he said, but he believed that it was in fact a path designed to overcome the limits of the ego and liberate higher levels of the unconscious. The goals of the Zen master and the goals of the analytic psychotherapist were, in that sense, not that different. There was much to learn from close comparative study of the two traditions, even if in the end (and it was an important caveat) 'a direct transplantation of Zen to our Western conditions [was] neither commendable nor even possible.' All the same, he concluded, 'the psychotherapist who is seriously concerned with the question of the aim of his therapy cannot remain unmoved when he sees the end towards which this Eastern method of psychic "healing"—i.e., "making whole"—is striving' (Jung [1939] 1991, p. 26).

Suzuki's years of refining a vocabulary and finding voice that would resonate with the universal language of Western psychology had paid off. He had found a new champion. When, in 1949, the Philosophical Library reprinted the original English edition of Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen*, the publisher included a new English translation of Jung's original

foreword.

In the years to follow, this book, more than any other, became the most common entry point for Westerners seeking to understand Zen. This was partly because it was seen as accessible—'the first book to deal with the mysteries of Zen for laymen,' as one reviewer of the time approvingly noted (S.S. 1937: 514; see also Blofeld 1960). But it was also because—with Jung's endorsement—the book had been culturally positioned as a new resource for the urgent psychotherapeutic and existentialist projects of the postwar world. In this book, Suzuki insisted that Zen was less a form of Buddhism than it was a universal philosophy of life – 'the spirit of all religions and philosophies.' He insisted that Zen was concerned, not with ritual, not with dogma, not even with belief, but with transformative personal experience. And he promised his readers would harvest profound existential and even psychotherapeutic fruits from their efforts to understand the Zen message: 'When Zen is thoroughly understood, absolute peace of mind is attained, and a man lives as he ought to live. What more may we hope?' It is striking that all the publisher's print advertisements for the book listed it, not alongside books concerned with Asian themes, but alongside works by philosophers and psychologists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel and the psychiatrist Karl Jaspers ('Back Matter' 1949).

The 1949 republication of *Introduction to Zen* was generally welcomed with praise and pleasure by reviewers from religious studies: 'There is no question that Professor Suzuki is the greatest living authority on Zen, and this small book is one of the best treatises in the field...' (Kitagawa 1950: 60). Within the field of psychology, though, the book seems to have had a more mixed reception. Madison Bentley (an American laboratory psychologist who had studied under Wilhelm Wundt and Edward B. Titchener) grudgingly granted that it was

important to understand the 'foreign' beliefs that move 'millions of men.' However, he clearly found the book opaque, and he observed rather tartly that Dr. Jung apparently believed that psychotherapists had a 'special aptitude' in grasping exotic Eastern ideas like these. And he concluded with some pointed references to the recent world war:

References [by Suzuki] to open brutality in the administration of koan, which are repeated time after time throughout the book, suggest... a reason why the practices of Zen should have been encouraged in the training of soldiers and should have flourished (notably in Japan) in times of war (Bentley 1950: 466).

In the end, it was not the experimentalists, but rather a new generation of existentially-oriented and humanistic psychotherapists who would most resonate to the psychological teachings embedded in the vision of Zen Suzuki was articulating in his books. These clinicians were already combing the works of Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, and Emil Camus for insights that would help them do their work. Suzuki's works found a place on that same part of their shelves. They read his books and, when he partially relocated to New York City in 1951, many became loyal auditors of his yearly lectures at Columbia University. In 1957, *Time Magazine* quoted Suzuki's wry observation that 'painters and psychiatrists seem especially interested in Zen':

Psychoanalysts, says Dr. Suzuki, his tiny eyes twinkling under wing-like eyebrows, have a lot to learn from Zen: "They go round and round on the surface of the mind without stopping. But Zen goes deep" ("Zen" 1957: 68).

Some of the psychoanalysts in question, such as Karen Horney, were major figures in the field. An early dissident from orthodox Freudianism, Horney first discovered Suzuki's writings in the 1940s, and was particularly impressed by his description of the authenticity or 'whole-heartedness' of the typical Zen master (Horney 1945: 162-163, 183). Here, she thought, were lessons in living from which the West in general—and neurotics in

particular—could surely benefit. When Suzuki came to New York City in 1951, she arranged to be introduced to him, and they became fast friends. A year later, they traveled together to Japan so that Horney could observe life at a Zen monastery and give some lectures at the Jikeikai Medical School in Tokyo (Suler 1993: 20; for more, see Dockett et al. 2003; DeMartino 1991).

Horney seems to have been profoundly moved by the experience, but what might have been a new chapter in her own analytic theorizing was cut short by cancer. Nevertheless, in her final (posthumously published) lectures, she urged her colleagues to engage with this tradition. In particular, she suggested that the 'whole hearted attentiveness' of what she called the Zen practitioner could be a model for the kind of listening attitude that the psychoanalyst needed to be effective in a clinical setting:

That attention should be wholehearted may seem banal, trite, and self-evident. Yet in the sense that I mean whole-hearted attention, I think it rather difficult to attain. I am referring to a power of concentration. ... This is a faculty for which Orientals have a much deeper feeling than we do. Wholeheartedness of attention means being there altogether in the service of the patient, yet with a kind of self-forgetfulness... Self-forget, but be there with all your feelings (Horney 1991: 19-21; see also Miller 2004).

After Horney's premature death, her student and close collaborator Harold Kelman succeeded her as editor of the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and Dean of the American Institute for Psychoanalysis. He also took it upon himself to pursue and significantly deepen her preliminary effort to envision ways to enrich the new humanistic psychoanalytic therapies with insights from Zen. Psychoanalysis needed to move, he argued, 'more in the direction of the Eastern master-disciple relation.' If it did, he could envision a powerful cultural effect on society as a whole in which perspectives from East

and West came together 'in ways heretofore not existent or envisaged' (Kelman 1959: 332-333).

More and more people were intrigued. By 1959, a new English-language Japanese journal *Psychologia* was publishing a steady stream of articles with titles like 'Eastern influences on psychoanalytic thinking', 'Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism', 'How to get Zen enlightenment', 'William James and Zen', 'Tao, Zen and existential psychotherapy', 'The concept of 'on' in Ruth Benedict and D.T. Suzuki', 'The contribution of George Wilhelm Groddeck on Zen Buddhism and psychiatry', 'Affinities between Zen and analytic psychology', and more.

In these years, however, there was one figure who aimed to stand above the fray and strike a synthetic note: Horney's former intimate friend and colleague, Erich Fromm. A psychoanalyst, sociologist and Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, Fromm had become famous in the 1940s for his book, *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941). There he had tried, among other things, to understand why people are attracted to authoritarian systems like Nazism, and discussed the feelings of anxiety and emptiness associated with becoming emancipated from such systems. Absolute freedom was not easy or even desirable; people need to feel embedded in some kind of larger worldview in order to live meaningful lives. Were there any world views on offer that lacked the rigid and repressive qualities that were so palpably dangerous for society? By the mid 1940s, Fromm had discovered Suzuki, and by 1950, he had begun to suggest that Zen might be such a world view:

Zen-Buddhism, a later sect within Buddhism, is expressive of [a] ...radical anti-authoritarian attitude. Zen proposes that no knowledge is of any value unless it grows out of ourselves; no authority, no teacher can really teach us anything except to arouse doubts in us; words and thought systems are dangerous because they

easily turn into authorities whom we worship. Life itself must be grasped and experienced as it flows, and in this lies virtue (Fromm 1950: 40).

Soon after this, Fromm sent Suzuki a copy of *Escape from Freedom*, and expressed his hopes for continuing dialogue. Twenty years earlier, it had been Suzuki who was sending gifts to the psychoanalytic community, hoping to convince them of the interest of his work. Now the tables had turned. By 1956, Fromm was dining at Suzuki's part-time home in New York City, and talking with him about ways in which Zen could contribute to a wholesale reimagining of psychoanalytic therapeutics and theory (see Friedman and Schreiber 2013).

By this time, also, Fromm was himself spending considerable periods of time at a new home in Cuernavaca, Mexico. At one point he suggested that Suzuki consider moving in with him permanently. When Suzuki politely declined, Fromm conceived instead a major conference based in Mexico that would try to take stock of the entire current state of the conversation between Zen and psychotherapy (see Friedman and Schreiber 2013). In 1957, some fifty psychotherapists—double the original expected number—participated in a week of presentations and discussions. Fromm later recalled the event as a magical time: what began as a traditional conference with the usual 'over-emphasis on thoughts and words' changed over a few days, as people 'became more concentrated and more quiet.' Suzuki's unaffected and authentic presence seemed to make all the difference, he said. His 'humanity shone through the particularity of his national and cultural background' (Fromm 1967: 88).

An edited volume of proceedings, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, was published in 1960 (Fromm, Suzuki, de Martino 1960). It contained contributions from only three of the

ten people who actually spoke at the meeting. It was peppered with romantic Orientalist images of an encounter between a contemplative and life-loving East and a mechanistic and hyper-rational West. It announced no major new conceptual breakthroughs. And it was short on details about how integrating Zen into the psychotherapeutic process might actually improve the experience that patients had in the clinic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nevertheless, the prominence of its authors, the timeliness of its topic, and the novelty of its agenda assured the book visibility. In short order, reviews had appeared in the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *Contemporary Psychology*, *The Humanist*, *The International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, *Psychiatric Quarterly*, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, and more (see Anonymous 1961; Brody 1960; Curry 1961; Hoffman 1964; Morris 1961; Rosen 1961). There was lots of praise. 'An excellent exposition of the points of contact and contrast in Zen and psychoanalytic therapy', wrote the reviewer for *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. 'Enormously stimulating and thought-provoking,' agreed the reviewer for *Psychiatric Quarterly*.

There were also more equivocal, even harsh reactions. 'Suzuki adds nothing to his already excellent accounts of Zen Buddhism,' sniffed a reviewer for *Philosophy East and West*, 'except perhaps to use the word 'unconscious' frequently and in a way which bears no resemblance to the use of that word by psychoanalysts. ...Fromm gives an excellent account of psychoanalysis and then tries, unsuccessfully, to relate it to Zen Buddhism' (Wienpahl 1965: 81).

Others worried more generally about the long-term impact of the new rapprochement between Zen and psychotherapy. Would Zen and related practices like Yoga now be 'put at the disposition of...careers, ...professional habits, publicity and even economic goals?'

(Scaligero 1963: 284). Alternatively, was it possible that the starry-eyed psychotherapists really didn't know the devil with which they were supping? In his review, the cultural anthropologist Ernst Becker (who would become better known in the 1970s for his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*) pointed out that there actually already existed a form of psychotherapy shaped by Zen principles: Morita psychotherapy. This therapy was far from the anti-authoritarian, existential therapy envisioned by the Western psychoanalysts who fantasized about integrating Zen into their practice. Instead, it employed traditional Japanese Zen authoritarian tactics designed to break down defences, including suddenly shouting at a patient and the use of sticks. Becker concluded: 'Surely no Western therapist would have his utopia created by [such] shock-treatments' (Becker 1961a: 17).^{iv}

Legacies and conclusions

The conversation was just warming up, one feels, when it was overtaken by larger cultural events. Bluntly put, the Sixties arrived. By the mid-1960s, *Psychologia* which had been publishing articles, just a few years earlier, on the relationship between Zen, existentialism and psychotherapy, now began publishing articles with titles like 'Reflections on LSD, Zen meditation and satori,' 'Zen and LSD: an enlightened experience,' and 'D. T. Suzuki, Zen and LSD-25.'

To the extent that people continued to pursue the older conversation on Zen's implications for psychotherapeutic theory, it tended now to have a new kind of political, counterculture edge. The widely-read book by the British-born Buddhist teacher Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West* (Watts 1961) helped set the new tone. In that book, Watts

insisted that the primary goal of both Zen and psychotherapy should be to help people resist the 'brainwashing' of 'armies, bureaucracies, churches, [and] corporations.' By this time, Gregory Bateson (who learned his Zen from Watts) had also developed his theories on the double bind in which he compared the family dynamics of the schizophrenic patient to the insoluble riddles that the Zen adept is expected to solve. The difference between the two, he said, was that the Zen adept had ways ultimately to transcend his dilemma and achieve enlightenment. The schizophrenic patient did not and so he went mad (see Bateson et al. 1956; for more on the link between Bateson and Eastern mysticism, see Pickering 2010). From here, it was a short step to the argument of psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing (also influenced by Zen) that the schizophrenic was a kind of thwarted mystic. *'Future men will see ... that what we call 'schizophrenia' was one of the forms in which, often through quite ordinary people, the light began to break through the cracks in our all-too-closed minds.'* (Laing 1967: 107).

After that, the original Zen moment in psychotherapy largely passed. It passed, not just because psychedelics had derailed the earlier conversation, but also because, after the 1970s, both psychotherapy and the Asian cultural scene looked different. In the 1960s, the Maharishi had taught a generation how to achieve 'bliss' by meditating for fifteen minutes a day; but in the 1970s, the cardiologist Herbert Benson musicalised the Maharishi's techniques and reframed them as a method of stress reduction (see Harrington 2007). By the 1980s, people interested in the mental health benefits of contemplative practices could look to a broader range of techniques now available in the culture ('just sitting' meditation, yoga, mindfulness training, breath meditation, body awareness), many of which had not been emphasized by Suzuki. In the 1960s, the Soto Zen monk, Shunryu Suzuki, founded

the first Zen training centre in the United States. The centre emphasized the virtues of sitting meditation (*zazen*) over the *koans* and paradoxes emphasized by D.T. Suzuki (trained more in the Rinzai Zen tradition). In the 1980s, Jon Kabat-Zinn developed a successful curriculum he called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (see Kabat-Zinn 1982; Kabat-Zinn et al 1985; Jon Kabat-Zinn 1990). In the 1990s, Marsha Linehan pioneered a therapy for suicidal patients that blended a Zen-inspired concept of 'radical acceptance' with active cognitive-behavioral work (see Linehan 1993).

Elsewhere within psychiatry, the brain was largely replacing the couch as the primary target of clinical optimism in psychiatry, and as it did, the Eastern turn in psychiatry took a biological turn. Books like *Zen and the Brain* became popular (see Austin 1999).

Scientists published studies on the mental health benefits of sitting meditation (see Davidson et al 2003). Images of the Dalai Lama of Tibet in dialogue with neuroscientists largely replaced images of Suzuki in dialogue with psychoanalysts.^v

Nevertheless, even if the story of Suzuki and his first interlocutors has been partly eclipsed by all these new developments, it also partly made them possible. It was Suzuki who, more than anyone else, first encouraged American psychotherapists to think of Zen as psychotherapy by other means, and the Asian religious traditions as a resource, not just for spiritual insights, but also for clinical projects. Even if today we are more inclined to talk about 'Zen and the brain' than about Zen and the unconscious, we still work with a range of assumptions about Zen as a psychology and a therapeutic path that he first helped to articulate.

Some scholars would find great irony in this fact. The argument that has been made more generally about Suzuki is that his 'Western enthusiasts' embraced his Zen only because he

had taken great pains to decontextualize and 'Westernise' the tradition for them: in the words of Robert Sharf, 'like Narcissus, [they]... failed to recognize their own reflection in the mirror being held out to them' (Sharf 1993: 39 see also McMahon 2002). And indeed we know that Suzuki, for reasons already discussed, spent years seeking ways to translate key aspects of the Zen experience into the language of Western psychology. But should we conclude from all of this that the psychoanalysts and psychotherapists who participated in Fromm's workshop in Mexico, attended Suzuki's lectures in New York City, and earnestly read his books were—on some level—dupes?

I think not. While it is true that most of them were probably unaware of the differences between the 'universal', psychologised Zen that they learned from Suzuki, and the Zen taught in Japanese monasteries and described in the old sources, it is unclear that learning the truth would have bothered them very much. Suzuki may have not been a purist in his approach to Zen, but they were all impure themselves. Like him, they believed that a tradition they loved was no longer adequate to the times. Like him, they were prepared to become cultural omnivores in search of resources that would allow them to reframe that tradition to serve new needs. In pursuing that goal, many read Martin Buber's *I thou* philosophy and Hasidic parables alongside Suzuki's Zen philosophy and Japanese tales, and blended insights from what they took to be 'the East' alongside insights from Christian existentialism, Marxism or continental philosophy. In this sense, the story of Zen and Western psychotherapy is best seen as a mutually impure, mutually self-serving, but also strangely sincere and idealistic East-West encounter; one involving people who were motivated by different goals and probably never fully understood one another.

ⁱ The West, Suzuki wrote (Suzuki 1970) is active, analytical, and intellectual, but it is also machine-like and 'scientifically objective.' In contrast, 'Asiatic people love life as it is lived and do not wish to turn it into a means of accomplishing something else.'

ⁱⁱ The English version of this book, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* had originally been published in 1934.

ⁱⁱⁱ This may have been partly a consequence, again, of the fact that the book included such a limited range of the papers presented at the meeting. One of the speakers at the workshop, for example, was Charlotte Selver, who founded a technique she called 'sensory awareness therapy.' Her approach went on to have a significant influence on the 'human potential movement' of the 1970s. It also influenced the Gestalt therapy of Fritz Perls. Tellingly, in the 1960s, Perls later became independently interested in Zen. He developed an approach in which he used Selver's techniques of body awareness to help patients achieve what he called 'mini-satoris'—brief moments of heightened awareness— during the therapeutic process.

^{iv} Becker went on to develop a thorough-going critique of the rising Western love affair with Zen in general (see Becker 1961b). For a discussion of Morita therapy as it was practiced at the time, see Sato and Kora 1958). Naikan therapy was a second form of psychotherapy inspired by Zen and native to Japan; it involved a highly-structured and intensive meditative practice that lasted for one week, and focused on restructuring a patient's relationships with his family. 'Naikan helps a person rediscover guilt feelings resulting from his ingratitude and irresponsibility. It also helps the patient discover appropriate feelings of gratitude toward those who have extended themselves to the patient in the past' (Tatara 1982: 229-230).

^v Even as it is true that the 1990s saw a lot of attention in this area turning towards the brain, we also see an attempt by a new generation of post-Freudian psychotherapists to pursue a new chapter on the relationship between psychotherapy and Buddhist-derived contemplative practices, including Zen. See Epstein 1995; Molino, ed. 1999; Young-Eisendrath and Shoji Muramoto, eds. 2004.

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