

"Zen & Western Thought"

Extracts/Adaptations from "Foreword" & "Editor's Introduction"

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by **Masao Abe**

Edited by **William R. LaFleur**

Foreword by **John Hick**

From "Foreword" by **John Hick**

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- Zen Buddhism is often thought of in the West as a kind of anti-philosophy, a matter of *living in the present moment of experience without any intellectual framework or presuppositions*.
- Zen does indeed lead to a *new quality of consciousness* in which the world is experienced directly and not through a grid of culturally created concepts.
- But behind the Zen practice of meditation there lies a profound and subtle philosophy developed over many centuries and stemming ultimately from the spiritual insights of the Buddha two and half thousand years ago.
- Zen philosophy presents *a radical alternative* to various presupposed doctrines of Western thought which seem (in the words of T. E. Hulme) "not doctrines, but inevitable categories of the human mind ... [People] do not see them but other things through them".
- The fundamental alternative to a set of Western assumptions is not another set of Western assumptions but *the genuinely different presuppositions of much Eastern thought*. Such an alternative occurs in one of its powerful and thoroughgoing forms within Buddhism, and specifically in the philosophy of Zen. The West can only be enriched, if at the same time puzzled and provoked, by awareness of this fundamentally different possibility.

From "Editor's Introduction" by William R. LaFleur

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- [T]he noted historian **Lynn White, Jr.** ... [observed that with] "the publication of **D. T. Suzuki's** first *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in 1927 ... the shell of the Occident has been broken through. More than we dream, we are now governed by the new canon of the globe."
(Ref: **Lynn White, Jr.**, "The Changing Canons of our Culture", in **Lynn White, Jr.**, ed., *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956, pp. 304 - 305.)
- What **Suzuki** [1870-1966] had tried to do at the time was to present Buddhism as something other than a relatively arcane tradition of ancient Asian texts ... he demanded that [Zen be considered] as a fully contemporary and valid alternative to the intellectual and religious traditions of ... Western experience. ... he was unusually able to engage his Western audiences with the promise that, through an understanding of Zen, they might grasp the 'difference' offered to the West by Buddhism as a whole.
- ... in the middle decades of [the 20th] century, the representative disciplines of philosophy and theology in the Western academic setting appear to have virtually exchanged and traded off to one another their customary postures with respect to the careful scrutiny of 'alien' or non-Western traditions. For many centuries, of course, it was the philosopher who was the more curious about non-indigenous traditions, whereas the theologian would have been interested in such traditions only for the sake of finding an opportunity to engage in apologetics -- that is, in order to point out the 'errors' of the other tradition and in this way preserve the domestic and established patterns of thought and belief. In the past, it had almost always been the theologian who had been conservative on this matter and the philosopher who showed genuine intellectual curiosity about things still unknown or culturally unfamiliar. While theologians kept the faith intact, philosophers such as **Schopenhauer** showed curiosity about the philosophies originating east of Europe.
- But in recent decades, these traditional postures have now come to be virtually reversed. In many ways, professional philosophy in the West has become a culturally insular discipline, engaged in a repeated reviewing of the classic treatises of Western philosophy and arriving at merely newer formulations of

old problems that were indigenous to the Western way of posing the questions of knowledge and the like. At the same time, these philosophers have quite stubbornly refused to become seriously engaged with problems and formulations that have arisen outside the ambit of the West. To see philosophy as so many 'footnotes to Plato' is to be aware, of course, of the existence of the continuity within our own tradition but it is at the same time a way of being profoundly *ignorant* of things outside the Western tradition. To that extent, philosophy has become, I think, a new scholasticism, a discipline which feeds itself only on itself.

- ... for whatever reasons ... there has been a cultural introversion on the part of Western philosophy so that among philosophers there has been no time, no desire, or latitude of mind to deal with thought having its origins in such exotic and still -- to them at least -- philosophically 'unproven' places as India, China, and Japan. [An important exception is **Herbert Fingarette**, *Confucius - The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1972.]
- During these same decades, things were noticeably different in the various divinity schools and departments of religious studies in most American universities -- especially, of course, during the sixties and seventies. It was in these parts of the academic world that thinkers from Asia and Africa were able to find persons ready and willing to talk with them and compare approaches to fundamental human questions. ... some of the most bright and inquisitive young minds [insisted] that their education ... help them see more than a convoluted corner of Western experience.
- ... much Western thought, even while consistent with its own original assumptions, appears from the Buddhist perspective to be philosophically askew. ... **Professor [Masao] Abe's** "*Non-Being and Mu*" ... detects ... a certain blindspot in Western ontology that stretches from Plato to Whitehead.
- [The author **Professor Masao Abe**] is totally engaged in an effort to raise us out of certain kinds of intellectual and religious slumber, a state in which we are presently more benighted than enlightened. ... [He presses] upon us the urgency of discovering the *religious* reasons and means for taking our own destiny in our own hands as human beings and as a single world.
- There is something true about the old supposition that philosophy is most truly

itself when it is peripatetic; it is then and only then that it can be really universal and really comparative at the same time. A certain price, however, is paid for such a peripatetic way of life and till now it has been paid by Professor Abe inasmuch as his essays in English have been scattered over three continents.