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Memories of Dr. D. T. Suzuki

Erich Fromm
(1967a-e)

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In attempting to write a few words of memories of Dr. Suzuki I am struck by the paradox that it is so difficult to write memories about him precisely because I see him so alive before me. How can one write „memories“ about a man who has just left the room for a moment, and whose presence is felt with all vividness?

I write these lines in the garden of our house in Cuernavaca (Mexico) where Dr. Suzuki stayed with us for several months, exactly ten years ago. Here he sat, walked, read, conversed, and although it is ten years ago, the strength and radiance of his personality makes him ever-present.

Should I write about his never-failing kindness, about his firmness and truthfulness, his concentration, the absence of vanity and Ego in him? Those who knew him know all this; and for those who did not know him, words like these cannot mean much. Perhaps I should mention his ever-present interest in everything around him. He was delighted to see a Mexican rug, or piece of pottery, or silverware. It was not only a matter of seeing it, but of touching it, feeling its texture and its form. He gave life to everything by his interest, by his active relatedness; a person, a cat, a tree, a flower--they all came to life through his own aliveness. The following story may illustrate this: when he had been in Mexico two years before, he visited the house of a friend and colleague of mine, Dr. Francisco Garza, and admired the beautiful garden with its many old trees. Two years later, when he returned and visited Dr. Garza's home again, he looked at one of the trees and asked: „What happened to the branch of the tree that was here last time?“ Indeed, a branch had been cut off, but Dr. Suzuki remembered that branch and missed it.

Should I give an example of his thoughtfulness? He always wanted to make us a gift of a Japanese stone lantern. But there were many difficulties entailed in packing it, shipping it from Japan to Mexico, and finally in getting it through the Mexican customs without our having to pay the import duties, a point upon which Dr. Suzuki insisted. While all these circumstances delayed the matter, he never forgot it. Just at the beginning of this year I received a letter from Dr. Suzuki stating that the lantern had been shipped, that he had found a way to pay the import duties, and mentioning the kind of place that would be best to place it in our garden. Indeed, the lantern arrived as he had wished; I am looking at it as I write this; but Dr. Suzuki had died before I could confirm the arrival of his gift.

Should I write about the effect his very presence had on me, on my wife, and on so



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many other friends and colleagues? His love for life, his freedom from selfish desires, his inner joy, his strength, all had a deep effect. They tended to make one stronger, more alive, more concentrated. Yet without ever evoking that kind of awe which the great personality so often does. He was always himself, humble, never an „authority“; he never insisted that his views must be followed; he was a man who never aroused fear in anybody; there was nothing of the irrational and mystifying aura of the „great man“ about him; there was never a sense of obligation to accept what he said because he said it. He was an authority purely by his being, and never because he promised approval or threatened disapproval.

My wife and I first became acquainted with Zen through his books, and later by attending his seminars at Columbia University in New York; after that, by many conversations here in Mexico. Sometimes we thought we had understood--only to find later that we had not. Yet eventually we believed that the worst misunderstandings had been overcome and that we had understood as much as one can with only the limited experience which is our lot. But undoubtedly whatever understanding of Zen we acquired was greatly helped not only by what Dr. Suzuki said or wrote, but by his being. If one cannot put in words what being „enlightened“ is, and if one cannot speak from one's own experience, Dr. Suzuki's person represented it. He himself, his whole being, was „the finger that points to the moon.“ I told him many Chassidic stories, which he enjoyed and appreciated in their close connection with Zen thinking. One of them illustrates what I am trying to say with regard to him: A Chassid is asked why he comes to visit his master; does he want to hear his words of wisdom? „No,“ he answered, „I just want to see how he ties his shoelaces.“

While Dr. Suzuki stayed here in Cuernavaca, he participated in a one-week workshop on Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis organized by the Mexican Psychoanalytic Society. About fifty psychoanalysts from the United States and Mexico participated, mainly because this was a unique opportunity to hear several lectures given by Dr. Suzuki, to hear his remarks in the discussions, and perhaps more than anything else, to be in his presence for a whole week. And indeed, his presence was responsible for a remarkable phenomenon. As one might have expected, the meeting began with the usual distraction due to over-emphasis on thoughts and words. But after two days a change of mood began to be apparent. Everyone became more concentrated and more quiet. At the end of the meeting a visible change had occurred in many of the participants. They had gone through a unique experience; they felt that an important event had happened in their lives, that they had waked up a little and that they would not lose what they had gained. Dr. Suzuki participated in all the sessions with punctuality and interest. He never made a concession of thought in order to be „better understood,“ but neither did he insist or argue. He was just himself, his thinking firmly rooted in his being. The hours of the sessions were many, the chairs were hard. All he needed was to be alone from time to time. One day Miss Okamura and my wife were looking for him; they could not find him anywhere, and just as they began to become a little worried they saw him, sitting under a tree, meditating. He was so relaxed that he had become one with the tree, and it was difficult to see „him.“

I have often wondered about the unique quality in Dr. Suzuki. Was it his lack of narcissism and selfishness, his kindness, and his love of life? It was all of these, but often I have thought of still another aspect: the child-like quality in him. This needs some com-



ment. The process of living hardens the heart of most people. As children we still have an open and malleable heart; we still have faith in the genuineness of mother's smile, in the reliability of promises, in the unconditional love, which is our birthright. But this „original faith“ is shattered sooner or later in our childhood. Most of us lose the softness and flexibility of our hearts; to become an adult is often synonymous with becoming hardened. Some escape this fate; they keep their heart open and do not let it harden. But in order to be able to do so, they do not see reality fully as it is. They become as Don Quixote, seeing the noble and the beautiful where they are not; they are dreamers who never awaken fully to see reality including all its ugliness and meanness. There is a third solution, but an exceedingly rare one. The persons who take this road retain the softness of a child's heart, and yet they see reality in all clarity and without illusions. They are children first, then they become adults, and yet they return to being children without ever losing the realism of adulthood. This is a difficult way, and that is why it is so rare. I believe it was this, which characterized Dr. Suzuki's personality. He was hard as rock and soft as wax; he was the realistic, mature man, who was able to look at the world with the innocence and faith of the child.

Dr. Suzuki was a „radical,“ by which I mean that he went to the root. And the root, for him, was man. His humanity shone through the particularity of his national and cultural background. You forgot his nationality, his age, his „persona“ when being with him. You spoke to a man, and nothing but a man. It is because of this that he will be present always; a friend and a guide whose physical presence was secondary to the light, which radiates from him.