

jhs

Abbey of Gethsemani  
Trappist P.O.  
Kentucky, USA.

March 12, 1959.

My Dear Dr Suzuki:

Perhaps you are accustomed to receiving letters from strangers. I hope so, because I do not wish to disturb you with a bad-mannered intrusion. I hope a word of explanation will reconcile you to the disturbance, if it is one.

The one who writes to you is ~~an~~ monk, a Christian and so-called "contemplative" of a rather strict Order. A monk, also, who has tried to write some books about the contemplative life and who, for better or worse, has a great love of and interest in Zen.

I will not be so foolish as to pretend to you that I understand Zen. To be frank, I hardly understand Christianity. And I often feel that those who think they know all about the teachings of Christ and of His Church are not as close to the target as they think. And I think, too, that many of the Americans who are excited about Zen are perhaps dealing with something in their own imagination, and not with a reality. It is not my business to make judgements about any of these people.

All I know is that when I read your books- and I have read many of them-- and above all when I read English versions of the little verses in which the Zen Masters point their finger to something which flashed out at the time, I feel a profound and intimate agreement. Time after time, as I read your pages, something in me says "That's it!" Don't ask me what. I have no desire to explain it to anybody, or to justify it to anybody, or to analyze it for myself. I have my own way to walk and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of it wherever I go. So there it is, with all its beautiful, purposelessness, and it has become very familiar to me though I do not know "what it is". Or even if it is an "it". Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll say simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But I still don't know what it is. No matter. I don't know what the air is either.

The purpose of this letter is not merely to thank you for your books, or to say that I am eager to read the results of your conversations with my friend Erich Fromm, in regard to Zen and analysis. That will be very interesting indeed. But I have another matter to ask of you.

Enclosed with this letter are a couple of pages of quotations from a little book of translations I have made. These are translations from the hermits who lived in the Egyptian Deserts in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. I feel very strongly that you will like them for a kind of "Zen" quality they have about them. If you agree that they are interesting and that they show this particular quality, I wonder if you would let me send you the complete manuscript, which is quite short, and if you would do me the very, very great honor of writing a few words of introduction to it. The book will be published by one of two well known New York houses, in this definitive edition. (Though at present a limited edition is being hand printed by a ~~few~~ friend of mine, without a preface.) I cannot assure you too strongly of my conviction that a preface from you would be a great and estimable favor. To be plain, I can think of no one more appropriate for the task, because in ~~all~~ simplicity I believe that you are the one man, of all modern writers, who bears some real resemblance to the Desert Fathers who wrote these little lines or rather spoke them. I feel therefore that the task belongs to you by right, and that the Desert Fathers themselves would want no one else to do it. I do hope you will be able to say "yes" to this clumsy request of mine.

Whether or not you can do this, I hope at least you will let me know the address of some publisher in Japan or else where where I might be able to get some unusual Zen texts that are not easily available in the U.S.

I have been rather fortunate in getting at some of the books available here and know the work of Alan Watts, including a recent book with a good bibliography. I have borrowed your books from libraries and have only two here, the American Paper Back collection and the Studies in Zen put out in London. I think I can keep track of the volumes published by Rider as they come out.

Are you coming back to America? Would there ever be a chance of your passing through Kentucky and visiting our monastery? Our Father Abbot has granted me permission to see you and speak with you should you happen to come here, and it would be to me a most wonderful pleasure to do so. We are quite near Louisville. I am sure that a lecture by you could be arranged at one of the nearby Universities to make it plausible for you to come to this out of the way place.

Or perhaps you have some friend in America who understands all these things and would be interested. He has only to let me know, and perhaps something could be arranged.

Now I have taken much of your time. I hope you will find something congenial in these few little quotations and that you will be interested in my proposal. Meanwhile I close with every good wish and every desire that you be filled with all spiritual blessings-- and with the hope that we may commend one another to God each in his own way. I certainly will do so in mine, and may the Lord bless you in everything.

Faithfully yours in Christ