Suzuki, Hartshorne, and Becoming-Now

Lawrence WILLSON

The aim in this paper is to discuss the philosophic views of Suzuki Daisetz and Charles Hartshorne with respect to the conception of process. The thesis is that Hartshorne's whiteheadian philosophy of process and Suzuki's interpretation of Zen Buddhism contain a common vision of what is concrete in human experience and, for that matter, in experience generally. Explicit focus is on what can appear as a crucial difference between the two philosophers concerning the issue of "a present now."

One concerned with philosophic and religious studies, and standing in some sense within the American tradition of so-called "process philosophy," finds an interest in Suzuki and the Zen experience of *zazen* aroused for two basic reasons. First, if a "philosophy of process" is to be true to human experience, it ought to be verifiable by every experience whatsoever, but falsifiable by none. Since Hartshorne in fact holds this principle of method worthy enough to be practiced, his metaphysics, if true to life, must be verified by *zazen*.

But within the general history of ideas, the experience of "enlightenment," "the peace that passes all understanding," has been reported by persons of varying religious and philosophic persuasions, and articulated in a diversity of ways. So secondly, the interest herein specifically concerns Suzuki's interpretation of Zen because it seems quite in agreement with some, if not all, aspects of Hartshorne's metaphysic and logic. Note, for example, the following claims of Suzuki that we have correlated (in parentheses) with certain principles Hartshorne defends. First, being is activity itself (process); secondly, the world of *prajna* or nonduality is always new, fresh, and dynamic, never a repetition—for unity is multiplicity (creative synthesis). Third,

sympathy and loving kindness are the very basis of Zen (sociality); fourthly, mind constitutes the ontological foundation of all reality (panpsychism). Finally, Zen always refers to concrete happening—absolute "nothingness" and mere "being" are abstractions, equally inconceivable (concretion).[1]

Naturally, it would take many pages to demonstrate these similarities and many more to show that the relation of the thinkers is congruent. But one apparent dissimilarity between Hartshorne and Suzuki is the following. Whereas Suzuki has held that becoming *is* being, Hartshorne argues that becoming *includes* being. From this fact ensues the debate between symmetrical and one-way relating. To report on this debate directly is beyond the scope of this paper, but the issue, as it arises between these two persons, turns on their respective conceptions of "a present now."

Following Bergson, Hartshorne's position in this regard is that *any entity or experience which does not now become is an abstraction from those which do now become.* That is, "process, as including its own past and abstract aspects, is the reality itself (*la réalité même*)."[2] But Suzuki's writings show that he would welcome these words. In fact he would insist that "a becoming now" is precisely the focus of the Zen experience of *satori* or enlightenment. Suggesting the analogy between life and a *sumiye*-painting, he has written that what has once occurred or passed through consciousness can never be rubbed out or retracted. "*Zen therefore ought to be caught while the thing is going on, neither before nor after. It is an act of one instant.*"[3]

Yet this "act of one instant" need not be interpreted as a mathematical point, that is, as lacking extension. On the con-

1. Suzuki Daisetz, *Studies in Zen* (London: Rider and Co., 1955), pp. 29, 55, 62, 99, 101; cf. Charles Hartshorne, *Creative synthesis and philosophic method* (London: SCM Press, and LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1970), chap. 1.
2. Hartshorne, *Creative synthesis*, pp. 109-110.
3. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, first series (New York: Grove Press, 1949; reprint edition, 1961), p. 300. Emphasis added.

trary, it may be conceived, indeed experienced, as a unitary act spread out within finite time but with no internal succession. And one may then conjecture that this unitary experience of "a present now" is the presentness or now which Hartshorne has called "a becoming actual"—as opposed to "a being actual."[4]

Indeed, it is here being suggested that this "becoming now" is precisely the meaning of the Zen conception—derived from intensive experiencing—of an "absolute present or timeless time." This seems be to the conceptual basis for Suzuki's having insisted that being *is* becoming.[5] Following Zen, we may label this *becoming-present-now* as "mind of no mind," the so-called "great affirmation of emptiness (*sunyata*)." This vast emptiness or nothingness is not, however, sheer abstract "non-being" but has a positive connotation. It transcends and is presupposed by both being (*sat*) and non-being (*asat*). Sometimes described as an "unconscious consciousness," it is, as experienced, an inclusive and intensive event or act which does not deny, but profoundly affirms, the ordinary everyday experiences of life—and in their most radically concrete particularity.[6]

But notice something about the logic of this discovery. Because there can be no fixed limit to time-division, we are forced to say with Suzuki that, though this experiencing consciousness unit is the shortest possible division of time, it can only be theoretically assumed, not logically derived.[7] That is, the *conception*

4. *Creative synthesis*, pp. 118, 123. Concerning the issue of mathematical points and instants, we may echo one who has taught us something about the philosophy of science. He persistently tells his classes: "There are no mathematical points and instants in nature." One is reminded here of Milič Čapek and his *The philosophical impact of contemporary physics* (New York: American Book Co. and Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1961), especially chap. 17, "The reinstatement of becoming in the physical world."
5. For an explicit statement of the notion that being is becoming, see Suzuki, *Essays*, p. 92.
6. Suzuki, *Studies*, chap. 4.
7. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected writings*, ed. by William Barrett (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Anchor Book, 1956), p. 268.

of such an ultimate unit of experience is, for all practical purposes, unattainable. In just this sense, "an absolute present" or "becoming-now" has been vividly described by Suzuki as "the bursting of time out of eternity," as the field, region or extended instant in which "eternity cuts into time." Suzuki could then write, neither realistically nor idealistically but inclusively, that *the unconscious is known through time only.* Or again, "There is no eternity as such: it is always to be in time-process; there is no so-called unconscious which does not come along with consciousness."[8]

But notice again that this has been Hartshorne's point all along. For on his view also, causal explanation is "incurably pluralistic." And on the basis of many past events, say *a, b, c* ..., one has to explain—alas one may appear to be burdened with—a single present, concrete, definite experience, *d.* As Hartshorne has written, however, "There can be no logic for such a derivation. The step is not logical, but a free creation."[9] This emerging, creative synthesis is evidently what Suzuki, following historic Zen Buddhism, has called "emptiness." Though negatively expressed, this too is a very positive idea.

Thus if a question comes to mind respecting the use of such a seemingly negative conception as "emptiness" (which means "no-mind" [*acitta*] or "no-acting" [*akarma*]), the reply to be made is that Suzuki and Hartshorne are yet in final agreement concerning this point. The reply they have given, each in his own idiom and in a particular way, is that "a becoming now" is coming into being just because it is. This raises in turn the question, why the contradictions: why is each act no-act, each thought no-thought, each locus of consciousness no-locus? Suzuki's reply is, "They are so because of *tathata.* They are so just because they are so, and for no other reason." Hartshorne's reply is his "logic of ultimate contrasts." These contrasts are ultimate: they are, because they are. But for this reason, we,

8. Ibid., p. 268.

9. *Creative synthesis,* p. 2.

along with Hartshorne, may call these contrasts "contraries" rather than contradictions.[10]

Perhaps now, and only now, the debate or puzzle over Zen and process philosophy can be settled—at least with respect to *directions*. But notice, the dilemma is not so much solved as dis-solved. If there is yet a difference between Suzuki and Hartshorne, where is it? More important, perhaps, how might it be found?

10. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 268; cf. Hartshorne, *Creative synthesis*, chap. 6.