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Abbey of Gethsemani
Trappist, Ky.

April 11, 1959.

My Dear Dr Suzuki:

What a pleasure to receive your kind reply to my letter. I was very happy to learn that my suppositions had been correct, and that you were indeed interested in the Zen-like sayings of the Desert Fathers. Thank you for quoting the two beautiful little poems about the monk and the burglar, so eloquent in their brevity. They show exactly the same spirit as that of the Desert Fathers. And one of the things the Zen Masters and Desert Fathers share, among so many other qualities, is their quiet humor, blended with spiritual joy that transcends difficulties and sufferings.

Therefore I am sending on to you the manuscript which has received the provisional title of "The Wisdom of the Desert". It is going by surface mail, and may take a little time to reach you. I hope you will feel free to say all that you like. I give you a free rein and hope that you will have many ideas. If you write a piece as long as my own introduction, or even longer, (which would be very welcome) we could think about dividing the royalties in some way: some for our monks and some for you, or perhaps for some good monastic cause of your choosing. I leave that up to you. As for the Desert Fathers, they are not worried about their share of the material proceeds.

I was very happy to hear that you are active with further writings on Zen. Your books are highly appreciated and fulfil an important function. I for one am always delighted to read a new one and will be most grateful if your London publisher sends me some, I will be awaiting them with anticipation.

We in the west are always ready to talk about things like Zen and about a hundred and one other things besides, but we are not so eager to do the things that Zen implies: and that is what really counts. I only wish there were some way I could come in contact with some very elementary Zen discipline, even if it were only something like archery or flower-arrangement. At the moment, I occasionally meet my own kind of Zen Master, in passing, and for a brief moment. For example, the other day a bluebird sitting on a fence post suddenly took off after a wasp, dived for it, missed, and instantly returned to the same position on the fence post as if nothing had ever happened. A brief, split second lesson in Zen. If I only knew some Japanese I would put it into a Haiku, but in English the seventeen syllables somehow seem to have no justification except as translations from Japanese. But the gist of it would be that the birds never stop to say "I missed" because, in fact, whether they catch the wasp or not they never miss, and neither does Zen. We in the west are the ones with the hit-or-miss outlook on life, and so we hit and we miss. And in both cases the results are likely to be tragic. I fear our successes more than our failures.

And now for your deeply moving and profoundly true intuitions on Christianity. I wish I could tell you with what joy and what understanding I respond to them. We have very much the same views, and take the same standpoint which is, it seems to me, so truly that of the New Testament. I am sending you an article on Easter herewith, which will show you how I approach it-- in Pauline language on this occasion. I would ask you to be indulgent, particularly toward the limited perspectives of the first two paragraphs, and toward the rather technical involvement in details of New Testament theology. But ~~back~~ behind it is the same paradox you bring out in the words "we are innocent just because of our sinfulness". That in fact is one of the great Christian paradoxes, one that has preoccupied thinkers like St Augustine, Dostoevsky,

St Paul and a thousand others. However this presentation of mine in the Easter article is not simple or open enough. A more direct and concrete expression of the same idea is in a little piece of poetic prose, Prometheus, which comes to you separately by surface mail. And with it yet another little book called Monastic Peace through which you will find running themes that reproduce your own paradoxes in various ways.

In your phrase "God wanted to know Himself, hence the creation" you touch upon a most interesting theological idea that has been developed by some Russian Orthodox thinkers and which has deep consequences and ramifications. Writers with this perspective are S. Boulgakov and N. Berdyaev. The Russian view pushes very far the idea of God "emptying Himself" (kenosis) to go over into His creation, while creation passes over into a divine world -- precisely a new paradise. Your intuition about Paradise is profoundly correct and Patristic. In Christ the world and the whole cosmos has been created anew (which means to say ~~re~~ restored to its original perfection and beyond that made divine, totally transfigured.) The whole world has risen in Christ, say the Fathers. If God is "all in all" then everything is in fact paradise because it is filled with the glory and the presence of God, and nothing is any more separated from God. Then comes the question whether or not the resurrection of Christ shows that we had never really been separated from Him in the first place. Was it only that we thought we were separated ~~fr~~ from Him? But that thought was a conviction so great and so strong that it amounted to separation. It was a thought that each one of us had to be god in his own right. Each one of us began to slave and struggle to make himself a god which he imagined he was supposed to be. Each one slaved in the service of his own idol-- his consciously fabricated social self. Each one then pushed all the others away from himself, and down, beneath himself: or tried to. This is original sin. In this sense, original sin and paradise are directly opposed. In this sense there is exclusion from Paradise. But yet we are in paradise, and once we break free from the false image, we find ourselves what we are: and we are "in Christ".

The essentially Christian element in all this is the fact that it is centered in Christ. But what does that mean? Does it mean conformity to a social and conventional image of Christ? Then we become involved and alienated in another projection: a Christ who is not Christ but the symbol of a certain sector of society, a certain group, a certain class, a certain culture.... Fatal. The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be "found in Him" and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself. You see that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom) it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men, and stand in the way of God's freedom. But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him (it is like the cowcatching pictures) and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side why? Because He is even closer than that. He is ourself. O my dear Dr Suzuki I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are "doctors in Israel".

I will have someone copy out the hymn called the Exultet which is sung on Easter Night in celebration and explanation of the mystery of the Resurrection. You will see in this what the Church really thinks about the "new creation" and new paradise in Christ. Right after the Exultet, the first chapter of Genesis is sung, with obvious implications.

As you know, the problem of writing down things about Christianity is fraught with ludicrous and overwhelming difficulties. No one cares for fresh, direct and sincere intuitions of the Living Truth. Everyone is pre-occupied with formulas. Is this correct, is this absolutely in accordance with such and such a formula? Does this fit the official definitions? Etc. Hence if you write anything about Christianity, I strongly suggest that you avoid any kind of commitment that would subject your statements to judgement according to this kind of standard. I hope you will present your ideas in such

a way that you will implicitly challenge the theological watchdogs. In other words, I would suggest that you do not preface your intuitions with even an implicit claim to state the nature of Christianity. If you say "this is Christianity" you will immediately hear a thousand voices shout "this is not Christianity". Which would be very sad, since in fact what you say is Christianity, and yet is probably hard to express in a way that would convince many Christians of its true nature. But you will certainly know how to procede. If you say "this is what I think" well, nobody can deny it. It is certainly what you think.

Meanwhile you see that I enjoy talking with you of these things, and I assure you I will be very happy to hear how the ideas develop. And for the rest, we are in Paradise, and what fools we would be to think thoughts that would put us out of it (as if we could be out of it!) One thing I would add. To my mind, the Christian doctrine of grace, (however understood-- I mean here the gift of God's Life to us) seems to me to fulfil a most important function in all this. The realization, the finding of ourselves in Christ and hence in paradise, has a special character from the fact that this is all a free gift of God. With us, this stress on freedom, God's freedom, the indeterminateness of salvation, is the thing that corresponds to Zen in Christianity. The break through that comes with the realization of what the finger of a koan is pointing to, is like the break through of the realization that a sacrament, for instance, is a finger pointing to the completely spontaneous Gift of Himself to us on the part of God-- beyond and above images, outside of every idea, every law, every right or wrong, everything high or low, everything spiritual or material. ~~But~~ Whether we are good or bad, wise or foolish, there is always this sudden irruption, this break through of God's freedom into our life turning the whole thing upside down so that it comes out, contrary to all expectation, right side up. This is grace, this is salvation, this is Christianity. And, as far as I can see, it is also very much like Zen. And of course, personally, I like to see this freedom of God at work outside of all set forms, all rites, all theology, all contemplation, -- everything. But the rites and contemplation and disciplines have their place. In fact they are most important.

And now one more thing. I feel obliged to say this because of the huge burden of the sins of the western world, the burden of our sins toward the east: sins committed in the name of the God and even in the name of Christ. I want to speak for this western world which has been and is so utterly wrong. This world which has in past centuries broken in upon you and brought you our own confusion, our own alienation, our own decrepitude, our lack of culture, our lack of faith. And worst of all, that we have shamed the Truth of Christ by imposing upon you our confusion as if it came from Christ. With us Christians tears of sorrow are supposed to be significant. If I wept until the end of the world I could not signify enough of what this tragedy means. If only we had thought of coming to you to learn something. There are some who want to do this ~~now~~ but perhaps it is too late. The victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are before me and beside me every day when I say ~~the~~ Mass. I pray for ~~in~~ them and I feel they intercede for me before God. If only we had thought of coming to you and loving you for what you are in yourselves, instead of trying to make you over into our own image and likeness. For to me it is clearly evident that you and I have in common and share most intimately precisely that which, in the eyes of conventional westerners, would seem to separate us. The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk far from separating us makes us most like one another. How many centuries is ~~it~~ it going to take for people to discover this fact? A fact so obvious and so salutary? A fact so truly and essentially Christian. Can you somehow convey this thought to any monks or such like people there who might be interested? I feel most united both to you and to them, and for this reason I sign myself,

Faithfully yours in Christ