

Japanese Religiosity and *seken* (World) in D. T. Suzuki's Shin Buddhism Thought

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Abstract

This presentation examines the relationship between Japanese religiosity and *seken* (the world), with reference to the writings of D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) as a case study. Suzuki left behind a large number of writings in both English and Japanese. As a general tendency, he wrote his works on Zen Buddhism for the wider world in English, and on Shin Buddhism to the Japanese people in Japanese. In other words, in Zen Buddhism, he found the characteristics of universality and globality that could be common to all peoples, while in Shin Buddhism he found those of uniqueness and ethnicity that could only be shared by Japanese people. Moreover, the instances of the term *seken* are far more common in his Japanese writings than his English ones. The fact that he discussed *seken* more often in his writings for the Japanese people implies that in this term, he found the uniqueness of Japanese religiosity. In considering that his Japanese writings were mostly concerned with the issues of Shin Buddhism, we understand that he may have detected a certain connection between Shin Buddhism and the Japanese term *seken*. This presentation will therefore attempt to clarify D. T. Suzuki's views of Japanese religiosity by focusing on his understanding of Shin Buddhism and the examples of the term *seken* in his Japanese writings.

和文要旨

本発表は、鈴木大拙（1870-1966）の著作を事例として、日本的宗教性と「世間」の関係を検討する。鈴木は英語と日本語の双方で多数の著作を残したが、一般的傾向として、禅については世界向けに英語で、浄土真宗については日本人向けに日本語で著した。つまり彼は、禅には万人に共有可能な普遍性と国際性を見出し、真宗には日本人に特有で民族的な性格を見出したのである。さらに、「世間」という語は英語著作よりも日本語著作に圧倒的に多く現れる。日本人向け著作で「世間」を多用した事実は、この語に日本的宗教性の特質を見いだしていたことを示唆する。彼の日本語著作の多くが真宗を主題としていることを考慮すると、鈴木は浄土真宗と「世間」との間に何らかの関係を認めていたと推測できる。本発表では、浄土真宗理解と日本語著作における「世間」の用例に注目し、鈴木大拙の日本的宗教性観を明らかにする。

I have been studying Zen thought in modern period, especially Japanese Zen scholars and monks who went to North America at the turn of the century. In this presentation, through a brief comparing English and Japanese writings by D. T. Suzuki (鈴木大拙 1870-1966), I would like to consider what he thought about Japanese religiosity and how it relates to Japanese “*seken*” (the world).

However, in advance, Suzuki's writings are, of course, based on Buddhism, and Japanese religiosity as he discusses is strongly inclined toward Buddhism. So most of the uses “*seken*” on Suzuki's writings are almost used to mean “*loka*,” “*laukika*” or “*sahā*” in Sanskrit Buddhist terminology, which have standard means “the secular world” (also called “娑婆 *shaba*” in Japanese). However, he detected Japanese religiosity in one of the various forms of Buddhism. This time, to follow with the panel concept, I tried to find the connections between Japanese religiosity in Suzuki's thought and the Japanese “*seken*.”

Before I begin, I'd like to quickly go over the main points. In my presentation, first, I will mention the tendency of Suzuki's writing activities, then, I will actually compare *Zen and Japanese culture* and *Nihon-teki Reisei*. And finally, I will relate Suzuki's idea about Japanese religiosity to Japanese “*seken*.”

At first, about the tendency of Suzuki's writing activities. Suzuki is known as a Zen scholar, but actually he also wrote a lot of works related to Pure Land thought and Shin Buddhism thought. Among these, there are also some large works. He left behind a large number of writings on both Zen and Shin Buddhism thought in both English and Japanese, but there is a general tendency among them. It is a tendency that he talked about Zen to the world in his English writings, and talked about Shin Buddhism thought to the Japanese people in his Japanese writings. It might be possible to say that in Zen Buddhism, he found the characteristics of universality and globality that could be common to all peoples, while in Shin Buddhism thought, he found those of uniqueness and ethnicity that could be shared by only Japanese people.

This tendency is also found in the circumstance of the translations of his works. Many of his writings on Zen were written in English or translated into English, on the other hand, his writings on Shin Buddhism thought were mainly written in Japanese and not translated into English during his lifetime. To reiterate, he talked about Zen to the world in English, and talked about Shin Buddhism thought to the Japanese people in Japanese.

I would like to show some examples. His main publication, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, is a revised version of *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, a collection of lectures originally given in English for Western audiences. In addition, the three volumes of his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and the three-volume introductory books on Zen (*Introduction, Training and Manual*) were also originally written in English and later translated into Japanese. On the other hand, his works on Shin Buddhism thought were written in Japanese originally. For example, this includes *Jōdo kei shisō ron* (『浄土系思想論』, A Study on Pure Land Thought Theory), *Nihon-teki Reisei* (『日本の靈性』,

Japanese Spirituality) and *Myōkōnin* (『妙好人』, Devoted Believers of Shin Buddhism thought) and so on. Some of these were translated into English after Suzuki's death, but there are more that have not been translated.

In short, Suzuki told the audiences outside Japan that Zen was the foundation of Japanese culture, and told the domestic audiences that Shin Buddhism thought was Japanese religiosity. In fact, in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, he says, “The influence of the various schools of Buddhism aside from Zen on Japanese culture was limited mostly to the religious aspects of Japanese people's lives, but only Zen transcended this limitation.” In addition, in *Nihon-teki Reisei*, he states that Shin Buddhism thought is “a direct manifestation of Japanese spirituality.” This means that “Japanese religiosity,” its identity which he thought lies in Shin Buddhism thought that he spoke to the domestic, that is, Japanese people.

A point I should add here: Suzuki's reference to Shin Buddhism thought is not to Pure Land Buddhism that originated in India and was transmitted to China and Japan, but to the Jōdo Shinshū that was founded by Shinran in Japan. Therefore, Japanese religiosity Suzuki refers to is based on Shinran's thought. I call it “Shin Buddhism thought” in this presentation. So, what aspects of Shin Buddhism thought does Suzuki regard as characteristics of original Japanese religiosity?

From here, I will look at the differences and gaps between the “Japanese characteristics” discussed in English in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, and the “Japanese religiosity” discussed in Japanese in *Nihon-teki Reisei*. This time, I would like to focus on the ambivalence of “solitude” and “directness.” First, regarding the “Japanese characteristics” discussed in *Zen and Japanese Culture*. These characteristics are explained in various ways in this book, such as “eternal loneliness,” “eternal solitude,” “simplicity,” “directness,” and “formlessness,” to cite a few examples. They are the concepts of “*wabi*” and “*sabi*.” Here, solitude, directness, and its formless aspect led to the constraint-free, purpose-free, and bondage-free spirit of Zen. And these experiences were given a positive meaning as enlightenment and the attainment of freedom.

On the other hand, although *Nihon-teki Reisei* encompasses these concepts under the term of “earthiness,” their features are similar in some degree. However, in *Nihon-teki Reisei*, Suzuki takes the argument further from mere descriptions of characteristics of Japanese people and connects them to Shinran's thought. Here, solitude and directness are related to the awareness of sin and karma in Shinran. And, in contrast to the case of Zen, these experiences were agony and despair for one person, Shinran. Suzuki does not mention the freedom of enlightenment here, but emphasizes the impossibility of escaping karma and the impossibility of being saved.

That is to say, the Japanese characteristics that Suzuki refers to, namely, solitude and directness, show unlimited freedom in creative activities of various cultures [Zen], but on the level of specific, real individuals, on the level of religiosity they are related to limitedness and a consciousness of sin [Shin Buddhism thought]. Considering that Suzuki detects Japanese spirituality more strongly in Shin Buddhism thought, it must be said that his idea on Japanese religiosity is extremely pessimistic.

However, Suzuki continues that it is precisely because Japanese religiosity is pessimistic and full of despair that the absolute passivity of betting all of the faith on Amitabha's compassion is nurtured. In short, Japanese religiosity which he explained to the people in Japan, is the sensitivity that people who cannot escape from sin and therefore cannot be saved feel the absolute other-power.

Incidentally, in Buddhist texts, the term “*seken*” appears relatively more often in Pure Land thought, that is Shin Buddhism thought in Japan, because they contrast the Pure Land with the secular world or impure world. Likewise, also in Suzuki's writings, “*seken*” appears more often in Shin Buddhism thought which was intended to be shared with the Japanese people. And thus, according to Suzuki's idea, Japanese “*seken*” is more deeply connected with Shin Buddhism thought.

Conclusion

Though it looks pessimistic at first glance, it seems that he saw Japanese religiosity at the religious sensitivity of the absolute passivity and the absolute other-power that grows from this despair. Regarding the formation of Japanese “*seken*,” Abe Kinya, who developed this theory, pointed out that the sacred lies outside the individual in Japan, and referred to the possibility that the fundamental Buddhist doctrines like selfless and mindless are deeply involved in the structure of “*seken*” also today. However, considering Suzuki's writings, in the formation of Japanese “*seken*,” I think it could be said that the passivity and the other-power based on the concepts of sin and karma in Shin Buddhism thought played a leading role rather than the doctrines of selfless in early Buddhism and mindless in Zen Buddhism. Further examination on this point will be considered in the future.

References

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