

## Affinities between Zen and Analytical Psychology

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*Editor's Note: With the kind permission of his son, Thomas Kirsch, M.D. (Jungian analyst, and member of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco), we reprint here the essay "Affinities between Zen and Analytic Psychology" by the late James Kirsch, a pioneer of Analytical Psychology in the United States. This essay, published in the journal Psychologia in 1960, was his contribution to a workshop on "Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis" held in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 1957. Three of the contributions to that workshop, those by Erich Fromm, D. T. Suzuki, and Richard De Martino, were published together under the same name as the workshop—Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis. Appearing as it did in 1960, right at the start of the widespread popularization of Buddhism beyond the limits of Beat Buddhism, this work has been highly influential in forming the field of Buddhism and psychology, as well as contributing to the construction of a psychologized representation of Buddhism. We are pleased to be able to reintroduce Dr. Kirsch's contribution to that conversation, a conversation that continues to grow today.*

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO ZEN BUDDHISM, D. T. Suzuki answers the question: What is Zen? by quoting from a letter by Yengo. "It is presented right to your face, and at this moment the whole thing is handed over to you. For an intelligent fellow, one word should suffice to convince him of the truth of it.... The great truth of Zen is possessed by everybody. Look into your own being and seek it not through others. Your own mind is above all forms; it is free and quiet and sufficient; it eternally stamps itself in your six senses and four elements. In its light all is absorbed."<sup>1</sup>

Those who know what Zen is will immediately understand what is meant by these words but to the outsider, and especially the Westerner, these words remain a great mystery. And yet, as Suzuki acknowledges, there have also been men in the Western world who have found themselves and described their experiences in a different terminology, and at times also used similar expressions. Meister Eckhart is a notable example. In our time it has been C. G. Jung who, coming from psychiatry and psychology, has discovered that in the psyche of some individuals developments take place which lead to far-reaching illuminations. In trying to give an approximate understanding to the Westerner of what Satori is, he calls it also "acquiring a new viewpoint."

Western psychotherapy originated in the consulting room of the psychiatrist. He was confronted with sickness of the soul and discovered that healing could only occur if the suffering human being could acquire a new viewpoint. One could say that the distance between the old and the new viewpoint was sometimes small, sometimes very great. Zen speaks of Satori as a sudden and extensive change of the viewpoint. In psychological language one would say that lesser or mere significant contents can enter consciousness, and without a doubt the psychotherapist occasionally sees that an extraordinarily significant and numinous content enters consciousness and transforms the personality in a most remarkable manner. This is particularly the case when an individual has a sudden realization of that content to which Jung has given the name "Self" in contrast to the ego. Such an event would then be a Satori experience. The name does not matter really and I hope my Eastern friends will not mistake this for the "ego."

Clearly and admittedly the methods of achieving Satori are far different in the East and in the West for they naturally developed out of totally different historical conditions. To a certain extent Koans and many aspects of Zen discipline must appear rather strange, understandable and sometimes also objectionable to the Westerner. Of course the same is true of the Easterner's attitude towards Western methods. I want to speak here of a series on dreams which in their sequence describe a process in which ultimately a great amount of significant, unconscious material comes to consciousness and thus brings a radically new viewpoint, which to the Easterner might not seem to be very impressive but which in the experience of the dreamer brings about an illumination. What Suzuki writes of Zen is equally true of the process of individuation as it occurs in some Western individuals. Suzuki says:

“Unless, therefore, you devote some years of earnest study to the understanding of its primary principles, it is not to be expected that you will begin to have a fair grasp of Zen.” Both approaches try to do what Richard of St. Victor emphasized: “If thou wishest to search out the deep things of God, search out the depths of thine own spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

My patient had found herself “cornered” in a situation which could not be solved by conventional or rational means, and to which the Unconscious proposed an unexpected solution. Quoting again from Suzuki: “The Zen method of discipline generally consists in putting one in a dilemma, out of which one must contrive to escape, not through logic indeed, but through a mind of higher order.”<sup>3</sup> The patient was in her middle thirties and had come to analysis for several years, mostly twice a week, during which time a great number of personal and practical problems had been adequately solved. With the solving of these problems and with the clarification of essential aspects of the life situation, one could have accepted the patient as “cured” but she hung on to analysis and felt that she had to go on with her treatment. In such a case one can be sure that a most numinous content has “constellated” itself in the relationship between analyst and patient and it becomes vitally necessary to make this content conscious. One would fail as a physician if one simply cut the patient off and sent her, as it were, back into the world. Both the patient and the doctor must discover the nature of this content and with patience and devotion bring about its realization. In this situation the dreams are extremely helpful. First dream:

“There was a marvelous piece of music or writing that needed to be retrieved. This piece of writing rested in a grave between the hands of someone who had died and been buried. I planned to retrieve it and in this dream saw myself as a man, strong and capable of it. At first I had no qualms or conflict about such a grisly undertaking but yet when you (analyst) asked me why I delayed, I replied, ‘Well, you know actually it isn’t a very pleasant task to rob a grave!’ And then I began to think just how unpleasant it was, for it would mean entering the grave with my own body and I envisioned the earth itself and what I might find. I continued talking to you: ‘But it is such an extraordinary piece of work that is there, I feel I must do it,’ and so saying, I undertook to get it. The details are not clear, but I know that I accomplished it.”

The patient is here given a task. There is no mention of who gives the task. It is simply stated that “it needed to be retrieved.” The ob-

ject to be retrieved is characterized by two aspects: it is a piece either of music or writing. That is, it is a content of emotional and spiritual quality and at this point receives no further characterization. The patient has to bring the content back from the beyond (death), that is, in a psychological sense from beyond consciousness (the Unconscious). Suzuki says, "That the process of enlightenment is abrupt means that there is a leap...the psychological leap is that the borders of consciousness are overstepped and one is plunged into the Unconscious which is not, after all, unconscious."<sup>4</sup> The dream then describes her plan of how to go about this task. She feels she has to be strong, even to the extent of changing her sex. At first she has no conflict about it but feels it is something she has to do in close cooperation with me, the analyst, to the extent that she feels my presence in the dream and addresses me as "you." It is then that she realizes a great deal of negative feeling about this "grisly" task, for she would have to enter the grave fully. It is only her awareness that this piece of work is of an extraordinary character that enables her to overcome her negative feelings and correct her courage. The dream ends with a certain vagueness but yet with the feeling that she has accomplished the task. Dream nine days later:

"I saw a river flooding towards me; it was a muddy yellow color. I raised myself and begin to swim in the direction of its current so that I would not be submerged, and then the sun polished all the facets of the water's reflections to a shiny yellow."

In this dream the Unconscious is symbolized as a river, i.e., as a dynamic process. At first there is a conflict between her and the dynamism of the process (the river is flooding *towards* her). The river is her libido and has a specific color: "a muddy yellow." In its psychological meaning, the yellow represents intuition (in her case the so-called inferior function, the least differentiated of the four functions described by Jung in his *Psychological Types*).<sup>5</sup> But yellow is also associated with healing. For instance, Paracelsus speaks of the flower "Cheyri," which symbolizes healing.<sup>6</sup> In Chinese meditation yellow frequently refers to the Self (The Golden Castle).<sup>7</sup> I presented my patient with these associations in order to avoid an intellectual limitation of the symbol. In any case a change of attitude occurs here in the patient. From now on her ego goes *with* the current of the river and, concomitantly, something occurs in the non-ego. The sun polishes all the "facets of the water's reflections to a shiny yellow." The ego's change of attitude also effects a change in the non-ego. Dream same night:

“I explored the cellar of my childhood home. Step by step I saw again each detail: the furnace, the coal, the coal-shute, the washtubs, the bathroom, the water outlets. Then I explored the outside garden and the steps leading to the porch. I was searching for memories. Emotions came back to me—slightly sad—but I could not discover anything traumatic or too dreadful to think about.”

The dream takes her back to her childhood home, somehow to the fundamentals of her childhood psyche (cellar). She sees then in detail symbols which have to do with the two elements fire and water; the coal as the accumulated basic energy, the furnace as the container which transforms this black natural material into fire (energy), and different tools in which the water is set and which function for the use of water. In this way she becomes aware of basic memories of her childhood and of basic energies. Since she was afraid that there might have been something pathological in her childhood, the dream is rather comforting since it assures her there was nothing traumatic or dreadful, but that this recovery of her childhood would allow her to feel certain emotions which she had repressed for a long time. Dream the following day:

“I am driving somewhere in my car—long, empty, lonely stretches. It is not daylight but not really dark, although progressively darkening. Suddenly I am on a huge divided highway with faint lights placed at spaced distances, and I become frightened. I think someone has misled me onto this road, which would take hours for I would become lost. I have the feeling that once before I have taken this road and become lost. The division curves into opposite directions and I take the one to the left. I arrive someplace where there are people and now the simplest of my movements seems to produce a completely irrational and unexplainable entanglement with objects. For example, when I park my car I have a distinct feeling of having parked too close and having collided with another car. But there is no physical evidence of damage. Instead this contact has produced—from me—as if by magic—the deposit of a pink scarf on the other car. I want to avoid talking to the people there but I keep being placed in irrational contacts with them. The second incident is my picking up and examining a watch belonging to a woman there. No sooner do I raise it in the air than near the face and partly upon the bracelet of the watch is deposited a blob of deeply-colored jelly. My feeling of strangeness is that I did not *see* the jelly placed there; it simply materialized; it is there and gives the impression of having *been* there; but it also was

*not there before I picked up the watch. Who put it there? Someone? Me?"*

In this dream the entering into the Unconscious is described as a path that leads into the dark. The gradations of consciousness are described as "progressively darkening." There she comes to a typical division of the roads (Scheideweg). She must make a fateful decision. The nature of her further experience and the course of her psychological development depend on which road she takes. Just in time she remembers that once before she was taken on the wrong road and then became confused and lost. This time however she decides to take the turn toward the left, to continue in the direction of the Unconscious, and in the Unconscious she encounters "people" (= personified complexes of the Unconscious) and realizes that every action of the ego has an immediate effect upon other contents of the Unconscious. Ego is understood here in the sense of Jung's definition of the ego as the center of consciousness. In the dream she gives different examples of such encounters which are obviously of psychical nature. The impression she has is that these happen by "magic," clearly evidencing the mutual effect which the ego complex and other contents of the Unconscious have upon each other. She gives two distinct examples: There is a collision between her car and another car—and as if by magic (a psychic event without any lapse of time)—there is a pink scarf on the other car. I understand this pink scarf as "feeling" in contrast to sexuality, that is, a feeling relationship now exists between the ego-complex and other complexes in another part of her personality. Since the ego is within the different complexes of the Unconscious, irrational contacts occur. Through this interaction of the various complexes a change of the whole personality is initiated. She uses the term "irrational" in the sense of the German word "irrational." The second incident brings the problem of time. Out of the Unconscious, again without lapse of time, something occurs which has no time: "A blob of deeply-colored jelly is deposited on the bracelet of the watch." It is undifferentiated psychic material which is "eternal." It carries a much stronger feeling-tone than the pink scarf and she is now filled with very powerful numinous feelings. Actually she tries in simple and beautiful language to express that something has materialized out of nothing. In picking up time (the watch) she also picks up no-time, or eternity (the blob). The dream ends then with the significant question, "Who put it there?" She an-

swers, “Someone? Me?” But this “me” is obviously not the ego. Dream four weeks later:

“I am seated on a couch watching television, together with several friends. Suddenly it is as if I have been transported to another setting: A party is taking place in an extremely large banquet like room which takes up the complete circumference of a building. I note with surprise that the motif of this party has been to provide individual sunken bathing pools for each guest, and I see that I am myself lying in one. I must have been prepared for it for I am enjoying it to the fullest extent because I suitably am wearing no clothes. We can all lie comfortably in our individual pools and listen to the host who sits talking to us. I gather he is some kind of potentate in order to have furnished such luxurious settings.

“The scene changes and I am expecting word from a man who has had to leave hurriedly. When I am told there is a letter from him for me, I search for it in a huge bag. Another man is trying to help me find this communication and we search together. We retrieve from the bag the beginning of a white scroll made of indestructible plastic-like material. It keeps rolling out and out as if there were no end to it. We keep pulling it out, searching anxiously for the writing on it—but there is no writing! We can only conclude that the writing has been washed away since the scroll had been placed among wet clothes in the bag.

“Then there is another party, this time with dancing.”

The first part of the dream describes a most comfortable, lazy situation. The main interest is to be entertained and amused. She enjoys the situation to the “fullest extent” and her attitude is that of the pleasure-loving guest of some fabulous host. This host is described as “some kind of potentate.” In our analytical terminology he would represent an animus figure (opinions and attitudes) who is mainly interested in an expression of the pleasure principle. Described here is the sort of life which has no meaning, where one lives for the moment and on the most superficial level. An interesting point in this description is that this large banquet-like room is described as circular and that every individual guest has his own sunken bathing-pool. It corresponds most beautifully to the drawing that Prof. Suzuki gives in his book *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* to illustrate a kind of thinking which is particularized; one in which a series of events is experienced each separate from the other and from the totality of the human being. Whichever way one looks at this symbolic drawing or the situation in the dream one can see it as a perfect description of a psychological

state in which the ego is in the center. It is the very opposite of totality. Pleasure-loving and divorced from the wholeness of the psyche, the ego is seduced into this isolation by the potentate-animus who incarnates the pleasure-principle.

But then a change occurs in the dream, and the significant and meaningful content enters again into consciousness. She is expecting word from another man; from another type of animus figure. It is again a letter, a piece of writing, as in the first dream. It is a message which is most significant and takes her out of the deceptively comfortable situation. She retrieves this letter which turns out to be a white scroll made of "indestructible plastic-like material," and which seems to be infinite. But since her ego is still ignorant and her consciousness obscured by the "potentate," the articulate expression of the message has been washed away and she is unable to understand it. And so the end of the dream returns to a situation similar to that of the beginning of the dream with the difference that dancing is added. But the principal subject of this series of dreams, the scroll of writing, has again been brought up as the most valuable content. She is searching for it but for the time being it is lost due to her egocentric attitude. Dream two nights later:

"I receive a series of letters which I read and study carefully. The black-ink writing on the white sheets seems rather shaky and the composition of the letters seems weak, but the content is so filled with emotion that I am deeply moved. It touches feelings I had experienced many times."

This dream takes up the same motif even more fully and more dramatically. This time it is not one letter but a series of letters which, in the dream, she reads and studies carefully. The writing is there but seems "rather shaky," and so much emotion enters into the letters that her consciousness is affected by these emotions. They bring back memories of emotion she had in earlier times but which had been repressed and had disappeared from her conscious life for a long time. As in the first dream, the work of art has to be retrieved. It is also writing, but the music is replaced by emotion. It is the same content but the emotions are quite different. No more does she feel this as a "grisly undertaking." On the contrary she is deeply moved by the spiritual content. When she awoke from this dream she could not remember the text of the letters. In order to bring it back to her mind she did what we call "active imagination":<sup>8</sup>

“It was my guess that the shaky writing and the poor composition could only come from someone who was in the grip of such a strong emotion he had little strength left to guide a pen carefully, or to express himself fully. Was it a man seated at a desk, his head now resting on his outspread arms? I looked at the letters again and saw the ink begin to fade perceptibly before my eyes. I quickly snatched at some of the words, trying to write them down hastily because I knew that some magic was going to erase it all almost immediately and my memory would correspondingly lose the original message. I worked in a kind of panic and was capable of retrieving only fifteen or twenty words before the print was completely obliterated from the sheets. It was amazing how, once the words were isolated, they became alien unknowable clues, and the context of the letter already lost.

“Working against time and resistance I sought to write anything I could possibly associate the words with, and a more difficult time I have never spent. The words I had been able to capture—and not in the proper sequence of their appearance either—were: dealt-mirror-undergrowth-formidable-replica-stealthily-write-full-length-commend-inevitable-sacrosanct-beseech-suffering-delayed-immobile-shades-princely.

“Seventeen words. First I tried pairing the words together by their contrasting qualities or by their similarity. But I could see at a glance none of them could be coupled. Rather their texture was one of continuity.

“I begin to piece together: I write at *full-length* to *beseech* that *sacrosanct* things are *inevitable*...but then I notice that *full-length* could just as well pertain to *mirror*. It’s no use at all to go on with this guesswork. I must simply start a train of thought and weave the words in somehow. And the following is what suggested itself to me:

“I have *dealt* with some *formidable* things in my time, but never has a more *princely* gift been presented to me. A *mirror* which is a *replica* of *sacrosanct* waters. I *beseech* you to *commend* such an offering to a *suffering* soul who can no longer remain *immobile*. Were it not that the *undergrowth* has various shades, its *full-length* size would not have been so long *delayed*. To *write* is then *inevitable* and no longer undertaken *stealthily*.”

So finally she has found that piece of writing which has been lying in her unconscious and to which the dreams repeatedly referred. Naturally it has a powerful meaning for her since it has been the leitmotif of this series of dreams, but what is indicated here is a gift of the future. It is a princely gift. It is a mirror, and a very special mirror—“a replica of sacrosanct waters.” It is interesting to note that Zen Buddhism makes

wide use of the symbol of the mirror. Suzuki says: “Dhyāna is Prajñā, and Prajñā is Dhyāna, for they are one.... It is like a brightly-shining mirror reflecting images on it. When the mirror does this, does the brightness suffer in any way? No, it does not. Does it then suffer when there are no images reflected? No, it does not. Why? Because the use of the bright mirror is free from affections, and therefore its reflection is never obscured. Whether images are reflected or not, there are no changes in its brightness. Why? Because that which is free from affections knows no change in all conditions.”<sup>9</sup> The patient’s mirror is the *numinosum* which exists everywhere and exists in her in its fullness. It is the consciousness of the Unconscious or the no-mind or universal mind, as Zen expresses it, the mirror which “needs no dusting.”<sup>10</sup> In our psychological language we would call it the Self. The writer of the letter beseeches the patient to commend such an offering (the mirror) to her suffering soul, which under this impact can no longer remain immobile. She can allow herself to move again and to have emotions. Were it not for the fact that the undergrowth—that is, different parts of her psyche which remained undeveloped and even misdeveloped—has various shades (different qualities), then these psychic faculties would have developed long ago. In other words, the undifferentiated part of her psyche would now have a chance to develop fully. The effect of accepting this mirror, the no-mind—or as we could also say, making the Unconscious conscious—would allow her inferior function to develop fully and she would then be able to write. That is, quite literally she would be able to fulfill her artistic capacities and would no longer have feelings of guilt about her creative abilities. But beyond this specific gift of writing, the very fact that the symbol used here is that of mirror of sacrosanct waters indicates that more is meant than the development of any special function. What is meant is the breakthrough of the whole human being. The experience of having received the seventeen words and the inspiration under which she wrote this had the character of a revelation. This piece of writing in itself represented a widening of consciousness, but not yet the full breakthrough of the Self. That is rather indicated in the text of the writing for the future and requires a great deal of further work. Nevertheless, it is psychologically of the greatest significance that this woman had now such an experience and that such a goal is set for her. I therefore believe that the path proposed by the Unconscious of this Western woman has the same validity for her as that of Zen for Japanese psychology. In its final analysis this

is the aim for both East and West, classically described by Zen-masters as Satori, and by Jung as the fulfillment of individuation. And I believe that Suzuki would accept this conclusion because he has acknowledged that the Satori experience has also occurred in the West, for example in Meister Eckhart.<sup>11</sup>

We in the West accept dreams, images, and imagination altogether as a fruitful path which eventually, when fully and intensely pursued and accepted by the human being, will lead to Satori. The East has rejected the images, which occur during meditation. It has used method of Koans to strip the ego of all illusions and to throw it, as it were, into the abyss and into the terrible conflict. We in the West have not yet, and perhaps never will, develop such a method but will accept the language of dreams which nature, the Unconscious, proposes. And if the individual human being gives his all to this process it will lead to the same result.

## NOTES

1. D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider & Co., 1957), 46.
2. *Ibid.*, 43.
3. *Ibid.*, 69.
4. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 185.
5. C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1923), 563.
6. C. G. Jung, *Paracelsica* (Zürich and Leipzig: Rascher Verlag, 1942.), 86 n. 2.
7. Richard Wilhelm and C. G. Jung, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1931), 98.
8. Active imagination:
  - a) C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 7 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 220, 387.
  - b) C. G. Jung, *Practice of Psychotherapy*, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 199; C. G. Jung, *Aion*, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 9 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 39, 323.
  - c) C. G. Jung, *Psychology & Alchemy*, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 12 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 243, 244, 262, 333.
  - d) C. G. Jung, *Practice of Psychotherapy*, 199; *Aion*, 39, 323.
  - e) J. Kirsch, "Journey to the Moon," in *Studien zur Analytischen Psychologie Festschrift C.G. Jungs*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Rascher, 1955), 1:319.
9. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, 182.
10. *Ibid.*
11. D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian & Buddhist* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), chap. 3.