

**PORTRAYING ZEN BUDDHISM IN THE TWENTIETH  
CENTURY: ENCOUNTER DIALOGUES AS FRAME-STORIES IN  
DAISETZ SUZUKI'S *INTRODUCTION TO ZEN BUDDHISM* AND  
JANWILLEM VAN DE WETERING'S *THE EMPTY MIRROR***

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**Overview**

In the twentieth century, few people have influenced perceptions of Zen in the West as much as Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki. Thus far, studies of Suzuki have not addressed the literary forms he used to convey his construction of Zen, thereby ignoring one of the most important ways in which he rendered his ideas attractive to non-Japanese audiences. To address this gap, my article investigates how two accounts of Japanese Zen Buddhism, Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934) and Janwillem Van de Wetering's memoir *The Empty Mirror* (1973), frame Zen Buddhist stories known as encounter dialogues. I argue that Suzuki uses these stories 1) to condition the relationship between author and reader as that between a master and a student; and 2) to portray Zen as an a-historical practice centered on "experience." In *The Empty Mirror*, however, framed encounter dialogues remain ideal portrayals that contrast with the protagonist's life in a Zen monastery. The manner in which Van de Wetering uses frame-stories thus implicitly critiques Suzuki's influential narrative of Zen, and suggests a manner of writing and thinking about this religion that takes into account both the ideals and failures of Zen Buddhist practitioners.

**Introduction**

At first glance, Janwillem Van de Wetering (1931–2008) and Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki (1870–1966) could not be more different. Whereas Suzuki became world-famous for his scholarly and popular accounts of Zen Buddhism, Van de Wetering wrote crime novels. Before he became a novelist, though, Van de Wetering ventured on a spiritual quest that led him from his native Holland to a Zen Buddhist monastery in Kyoto, Japan. This experience inspired his first book, a fascinating but virtually unstudied memoir titled *The Empty Mirror*. I argue that in this memoir, Van de Wetering testifies to Suzuki's influence while simultaneously showing that Suzuki's portrayal of Zen is idealized. By comparing both authors' framing of Zen Buddhist stories, Van de Wetering's ambiguous attitude towards

Suzuki becomes clear. Whereas Suzuki uses these stories to portray Zen insight as an experience accessible to anyone, in *The Empty Mirror* the stories remain as ideal representations of enlightenment that continue to remain out of reach.

Suzuki's influence has resulted in significant critical attention. His influence on the Beat Generation, the composer John Cage, and, via Cage, on the Fluxus performance art movement are all well attested.<sup>1</sup> Western scholarship on Zen, too, has for a long time followed in Suzuki's tracks. However, since the 1990s his position has been seriously questioned, particularly his casting of Zen as the very essence of Japaneseness, an idea complicit with a nationalist ideology popular before and during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Such scholarship has also shown that Suzuki characterizes the Zen tradition by relying on terms alien to that tradition, foremost among which is a transcendental notion of experience.<sup>3</sup>

Surveying these two strains of criticism, Richard Jaffe points out that Suzuki's wartime complicity has been exaggerated, and that his project, translating Zen for the West, justifies his usage of western terminology even if that terminology is not found within the Zen tradition. Ultimately, Jaffe argues, Suzuki was not concerned with any historical incarnation of Zen, but

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<sup>1</sup> For Suzuki's influence on the Beats, see Jane E. Falk, "The Beat Avant-Garde, the 1950's, and the Popularizing of Zen Buddhism in the United States" (Ohio State University, 2002), 92–135. For his influence on Cage, see David Nicholls, *John Cage, American Composers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 46–48. For Cage's influence on Fluxus, see Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 20–23.

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33/1 (1993); Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 52–88; Brian Victoria, *Zen at War*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006); Judith Snodgrass, "Publishing Eastern Buddhism: D.T. Suzuki's Journey to the West," in Thomas David DuBois, ed., *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46–72.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42/3 (1995), 228–83.

instead, he put the emphasis on the essence of Zen and what it can mean for the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

What these discussions of the value of Suzuki's portrayal of Zen have neglected are the literary features of his prose. If Suzuki's writing has been particularly influential, one would suspect that one reason for this might be the very materiality of his writing, its literary form. In this article, I show that it is the manner in which Suzuki frames canonized Zen stories, called encounter dialogues, that has rendered his work rhetorically effective.

As "mirrors in the text," encounter dialogues reinforce and reflect a narrative where Suzuki is the Zen master and the reader a student. *The Empty Mirror* mimics Suzuki's manner of framing to an extent, while critiquing it at the same time. In his 1975 review of Van de Wetering's memoir, the famous Zen scholar Inagaki Hisao noted this ambiguity, describing the book as "another addition to the long list of books produced in the current world-wide boom of Zen," but "probably unique in not pretending to know what *satori* is."<sup>5</sup>

In particular, *The Empty Mirror* enacts this implicit critique by reproducing the idealized Zen stories that Suzuki cites in abundance within a narrative that describes a failure of those stories to become reality. Van de Wetering thus maintains a tension between what the autobiographical main character experiences and what he expects to experience based upon what he has read in Suzuki's books.

He thus achieves three things at the same time: he attests to Suzuki's influence, critiques Suzuki's view of Zen, and shows us another way of thinking and writing about Zen, one that gives a voice to those Zen Buddhists who do not obtain the enlightenment experience that Suzuki posits as the goal of all practice. At a time when Suzuki's vision of Zen remains influential, Van de Wetering's alternative is well worth pondering.

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<sup>4</sup> Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, *Selected Works of D.T. Suzuki: Zen*, ed. Richard M. Jaffe, vol. 1 (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), xiv; Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Series 64 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), xxii.

<sup>5</sup> Hisao Inagaki, "Review of *The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (New Series)* 107/1 (1975), 87.

### Suzuki's Mirrors in the Text

John McRae<sup>6</sup> asked in 2000, “Why are descriptions of Ch’an [Zen] practice, both medieval and modern, so dominated by dialogues, narratives, and orality?” About ten years earlier, Robert Buswell asked the same question, pointing out that such stories present “an idealized paradigm of the Zen spiritual experience” that ignores the realities of Zen practice.<sup>7</sup> Though both McRae and Buswell identify Suzuki as “the most notable practitioner of this strategy [of abundantly using stories to talk about Zen],”<sup>8</sup> neither examines this “strategy” in detail. I will show that Suzuki uses a literary technique called “the mirror in the text” to condition a hierarchical relationship between author and reader. Examining this technique allows us to question a narrative of Zen that persists today.

I analyze Suzuki's manner of discussing Zen through a reading of *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, a 1934 book so important that Carl Jung wrote a foreword to the German translation. *An Introduction* has two textual levels. On the first or higher level, Suzuki describes his view of the Zen Buddhist tradition. In his discussion, he regularly cites canonized stories that describe the actions of legendary Zen masters. These stories constitute a second level of discourse within the text, and are framed within the larger narrative in such a way that they reflect the contents of the first level, turning them into what I will identify as “mirrors in the text.”

Consider, for example, the third chapter of *An Introduction*. Like most chapters of the book, this chapter tries to answer a basic question about Zen, namely “Is Zen Nihilistic?” In the first three pages, Suzuki seems to entertain the possibility that this is indeed the case, and subsequently cites eight stories, of which I only quote the first two:

“I come here to seek the truth of Buddhism,” a disciple asked a [Zen] master.

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<sup>6</sup> John R McRae, “The Antecedents of Encounter Dialogue in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism,” in Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., *The Kōan: Text and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>8</sup> McRae, “The Antecedents of Encounter Dialogue in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism,” 46.

“Why do you seek such a thing here?” answered the master. “Why do you wander about, neglecting your own precarious treasure at home? I have nothing to give you, and what truth of Buddhism do you desire to find in my monastery? There is nothing, absolutely nothing.”

A master would sometimes say: “I do not understand Zen, I have nothing here to demonstrate; therefore, do not remain standing so, expecting to get something out of nothing. Get enlightened by yourself, if you will. If there is anything to take hold of, take it by yourself.”<sup>9</sup>

There are several things worth noting about the dialogues quoted above. They consist of an enigmatic exchange between one person deemed higher in spiritual realization (the master) and one lower (the student). The “message” of the exchange would seem to belie that hierarchy, since the putative “master” demonstrates his mastery by rejecting personal authority. He does not know what “Zen” or “Buddhism” is, and urges his student to figure it out himself. Descriptive indexes are minimal: we do not know where or when this encounter takes place, or what the participants may have been thinking. In a sense, the interlocutors are pure external forms, for the invisible narrator also tells us nothing of their interior subjectivity.

At least since Yanagida Seizan, such Zen stories have been called “encounter dialogue” in Buddhist Studies, and that is how I refer to them here, though they are perhaps better known under their form as *kōan*. Recent scholarship has pointed out that encounter dialogues, typically found in medieval “Records of Sayings” collections that brought together stories about the ancient masters of Zen, are literary creations shaped by the political contingencies of the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, not accurate representations of Zen practice during those time periods.<sup>10</sup> Yet that

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<sup>9</sup> Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 96–131; Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 195–242; Albert Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Albert Welter, *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy: The Development of Chan’s Records of Sayings*

is how Suzuki treats these dialogues here: as historically transparent and accurate evidence for his own assertions about Zen's essence. Because these dialogues refuse to disclose their ultimate referent, instead suggesting it vaguely like the classic Zen story of a finger pointing at the moon, Suzuki can project his own idiosyncratic ideas about Zen onto them. He does this on the higher textual level within which these dialogues are framed.

The dialogues above, for example, are cited as implying that Zen is "nihilistic." However, shortly after entertaining this interpretation, Suzuki denies that it is valid, and instead claims that, "Zen always aims at grasping the central fact of life, which can never be brought to the dissecting table of the intellect."<sup>11</sup> Suzuki's interpretative mobility here (first hinting that the dialogues demonstrate one idea and then citing them as evidence for another) shows the level of ambiguity encounter dialogues possess. Ironically, by calling attention to this hermeneutic ambiguity, Suzuki unconsciously undermines the idea that encounter dialogues can serve as a stable basis to represent the essence of Zen, an idea that is foundational for *An Introduction* as a whole.

Suzuki frames encounter dialogues on the lower level as evidence for what he asserts on the higher level. In *An Introduction*, encounter dialogues therefore function as "mirrors in the text," a term Lucien Dällenbach has used to describe a specific quality of "frame-stories" or *mise en abyme*. Dällenbach distinguishes three ways in which these "mirrors" can reflect the narratives in which they are incorporated: "reflexions [sic] of the utterance, reflexions of the enunciation, and reflections of the whole code."<sup>12</sup> In other words, "reflections of the utterance" mirror the plot of the novel or the characters within it (often both); "reflections of the enunciation" show or problematize the relation between author and reader (e.g. putting readers in the narrative who have read the story they themselves are a part of, or putting

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*Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 131–56; Morten Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 22 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 15–16; Alan Cole, *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), 43.

in authorial figures who resemble the real author of the work, and so forth); and lastly, “reflections of the code” mirror the way the work is written, the code as a whole (e.g. what principles structured the literary work?).

Suzuki’s encounter dialogues operate as reflections of the enunciation, prescribing a role division that casts the author as a Zen master and the reader as a Zen student, a power dynamic that is uneven. Consider this encounter dialogue cited by Suzuki:

Hyakujo (Pai-chang) went out one day attending his master Baso (Ma-tsu), when they saw a flock of wild geese flying. Baso asked:  
 “What are they?”  
 “They are wild geese, sir.”  
 “Whither are they flying?”  
 “They have flown away.”  
 Baso, abruptly taking hold of Hyakuji’s nose, gave it a twist. Overcome with pain, Hyakujo cried out: “Oh! Oh!”  
 Said Baso, “You say they have flown away, but all the same they have been here from the very first.”  
 This made Hyakujo’s back wet with perspiration; he had *satori*.<sup>13</sup>

Here, the master’s replies to the student’s questions lead the latter to *satori*, the spiritual awakening that for Suzuki constitutes the ultimate goal of Zen practice. Note the violence accompanying this exchange: Baso can twist Hyakujo’s nose because he is the latter’s social and spiritual superior, a position the tradition calls “enlightened.”

The uneven power dynamic that characterizes encounter dialogues shapes the relationship between author and reader in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Throughout the book, the reader is assumed to be asking questions of Suzuki, an assumption reflected in chapter titles such as “What is Zen?” and “Is Zen nihilistic?”<sup>14</sup> These titles cast the reader as a student of Zen, a role emphasized by the encounter dialogues Suzuki continually cites. Suzuki

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<sup>13</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 59–60.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, all the other chapters in the book might also be phrased as questions from a Western viewpoint. For example, in the chapter titled “Illogical Zen,” Suzuki answers the question “Is Zen logical?”

himself takes the role of Zen master. Throughout the book, he avoids rational explanations and delights in puzzling the reader. This position as a master is not left implicit. Suzuki tells his reader:

You and I are supposedly living in the same world, but who can tell that the thing we popularly call a stone that is lying before my window is the same to both of us? You and I sip a cup of tea. That act is apparently alike to us both, but who can tell what a wide gap there is subjectively between your drinking and my drinking? In your drinking there may be no Zen, while mine is brim-full of it.<sup>15</sup>

While the reader “may” have had some taste of Zen experience, there is no doubt about Suzuki’s claim to it. In *An Introduction*, the division reader-author mirrors the division student-master. This qualifies the encounter dialogues not only as inset narratives conditioning this relationship, but also as “transpositions,” a paradigmatic function of inset narratives according to Dällenbach.<sup>16</sup>

The operation of such transpositions is similar to that of Freudian dreamwork, in that familiar elements are transformed and repositioned. Like dreams, transpositions “pluralize meaning.” The *mise en abyme* multiplies the amount of possible interpretations of the larger literary work. An example is Apuleus’ *The Golden Ass*. In this Ancient Roman novel, the first three books, which are a picaresque tale, are followed by a mystical inset narrative in the next three books. The *mise en abyme* offers itself as a re-reading of the picaresque component, which thus acquires mystical dimensions. The relatively superficial picaresque<sup>17</sup> gains a profundity of depth it would not have had without the added meaning generated by the *mise en abyme*. Paradoxically then, the tiny *mise en abyme* ends up reframing, and thus conceptually dominating the larger narrative. Dällenbach comments:

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<sup>15</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Mirror in the Text*, 56–59.

<sup>17</sup> The picaresque novel typically has an episodic structure, and its contents feature action, heroes and villains. An archetypical example of the genre is *Lazarillo de Tormes*.



Compensating for what they lack in textual extent by their power to invest meaning, such transpositions present a paradox: although they are microcosms of the fiction, they superimpose themselves semantically on the macrocosm that contains them, overflow it and end up by engulfing it, in a way, within themselves.<sup>18</sup>

We might stop here and ask how this works: if transpositions are about pluralizing meaning, how can they “engulf” the whole narrative? Dällenbach answers that this process is possible only by using certain genres that allow for such universalization, such as tales or myths.

The encounter dialogues Suzuki employs allow for universalization and thus function as transpositions because they lack any clear meaning or context. These texts first pluralize the meaning of Suzuki’s book. That is to say, not only does Suzuki’s use of encounter dialogues enable readers to enjoy curious tales within a book of philosophy, it also allows them to step into those narratives, tasting what it is like to be a student with Suzuki as master. Ironically, such a pluralization eventually limits interpretation, ossifying the readers’ position as acolytes of a master. In other words, the enunciative relationship that *An Introduction* proposes is hierarchical, with readers subordinate to the author.

This is a surprising conclusion, though one foreseen by Dällenbach: the dialogues have indeed “overflowed” and “engulfed” the main narrative “within themselves.” This manner of framing stories and thus determining the role of the reader as student and the author as master has been very influential. Most non-scholarly books published on Zen today present a similar paradigm, where the author positions himself as spiritually superior to his audience.

Suzuki also uses encounter dialogues to legitimize an idiosyncratic view of Zen, one that also remains influential and often acts as a lens through which the entire tradition is read. According to Suzuki, the essence of Zen is “a pure experience, the very foundation of our being and thought.”<sup>19</sup> In *An Introduction*, he sets out to demonstrate this idea through interpreting the inset dialogues. For example, he reads the exchange between Hyakujo and Baso (which ended in a nose-twist) as evidence that awakening or *satori* “is an experience which no amount of explanation or argument can make

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<sup>18</sup> Dällenbach, *Mirror in the Text*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 21.

communicable to others unless the latter themselves had it previously.”<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Suzuki talks about *satori* as a “new viewpoint.”<sup>21</sup> But the Zen texts he cites as evidence for that position contain no such ideas: their message is very unclear. Suzuki, however, while claiming that *satori* or Zen cannot be communicated, nevertheless interprets all these dialogues in a manner that nowhere admits its own historical contingency. Ironically, his historically determined focus on identifying the perennial essence of Zen prevents exactly this admission.

Recent scholarship has shown that this move, namely interpreting Zen Buddhism through the lens of experience, has little basis in pre-modern Zen Buddhist texts. Robert Sharf and Bernard Faure, among others, have argued that Suzuki’s understanding of experience is a very modern one, inspired by the work of Suzuki’s lifelong friend Nishida Kitaro, who in turn based it on a reading of William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 58, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 52–88; Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” 22; Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” 248. While acknowledging Faure and Sharf’s critique as valid, Richard Jaffe has pointed out that something resembling Suzuki’s concept of experience does exist in the writings of the famous eighteenth-century Japanese master Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768; Suzuki, *Selected Works of D.T. Suzuki: Zen*, 1:xxxix). Furthermore, as I pointed out in my introduction, Jaffe has defended Suzuki’s usage of experience as part of his project of modernizing Zen, arguing that Suzuki only intended to accurately represent the essence of Zen and not the historical tradition. While Jaffe is right in pointing out that we should not judge Suzuki on what he never meant to do, this purpose is never made very clear in Suzuki’s introductory books, which mix discussions of practice in Zen monasteries (the final chapter of *An Introduction* is titled “The Meditation Hall and the Monk’s Life”) with explanations of the essence of Zen (“What is Zen?”; “Zen a Higher Affirmation”). This mix gives the reader the impression that Suzuki’s Zen is actually practiced, and is not just an ideal. As I discuss in the next part of this article, Van de Wetering’s memoir depicts a man departing for Japan under exactly this assumption: that the ideal Zen of Suzuki’s books is practiced in Japanese monasteries. I would therefore argue that Suzuki’s usage of experience is more than a modernizing move: it is part of a strategy

In brief, Nishida, the founding figure of the Kyoto school of Japanese philosophy, proposed that at the basis of human consciousness there lies a “pure experience” that precedes and envelops all dualistic oppositions like subject-object, universal-individual, and so on. Because it exists before mental categorizations and even consciousness of time, pure experience is universal and eternal, and therefore forms the foundation of all the world’s religions. However, the Japanese have most perfected their access to pure experience, and in the meditation of Zen monks, the concentration of samurai in a bout, or the pouring of tea in a tea ceremony Nishida sees the best examples of accessing such experiences.<sup>23</sup>

What does Suzuki’s use of Nishida’s “pure experience” mean for his interpretation of Zen? Suzuki’s stress on pure experience becomes a means of asserting the authority of his interpretation of the encounter dialogues he so abundantly cites. As is clear from the cited summary, in principle Nishida’s experience is accessible to all. Yet, and Suzuki developed this dimension in-depth, the Japanese are best equipped to feel it. Thus, what is presented as a universal feature of human perception turns out to be particularly accessible in the “East,” especially Japan. Significantly, in the first chapter of *An Introduction*, Suzuki follows an assertion that Zen “most strongly and persistently insists on an inner spiritual experience”<sup>24</sup> by concluding: “Therefore I make bold to say that in Zen are found systematized, or rather crystallized, all the philosophy, religion, and life itself of the Far-Eastern people, especially of the Japanese.”<sup>25</sup> In his position as a Japanese introducing Zen to the West, Suzuki immunizes himself from any criticism from his Western readers, for those readers are not only not

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of making Zen attractive to western readers while also consolidating Suzuki’s authority in speaking for the tradition.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Edgar Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 13–60; John C. Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 12, 2010 (accessed August 2, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/nishida-kitaro/>). For a substantive critique of this notion of experience, and how it is complicit with the Japanese war effort, see James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 77–131.

<sup>24</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Japanese, they are not even “Far-Eastern.” Suzuki, who is Japanese, explicitly identifies himself as having had the experience he reads into encounter dialogues. As quoted previously, he tells his reader that his cup is “brim-full” of Zen. This unequal power relationship is reinforced by the metafictional relegation of the reader to the role of a student, a process already discussed.

Thus far, I have focused only on *An Introduction* as a sample of Suzuki’s writing. However, the pattern I have identified appears in nearly all non-specialist introductions to Zen Buddhism Suzuki wrote. Consider *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. In the introduction to the first volume of the *Essays* (1927), Suzuki emphasizes the importance of encounter dialogues: “The ‘Goroku’ [“Records of Sayings,” collections of encounter dialogue] is the only literary form in which Zen expresses itself.”<sup>26</sup> Later on, he stresses the importance of experience: “Zen proposes its solution [to the problems of life] by directly appealing to facts of personal experience and not to book knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> This assertion is quickly followed by two encounter dialogues, which Suzuki again explains as indicating “that Zen was not subject to logical analysis or to intellectual treatment. It must be directly and personally experienced by each of us in his inner spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

Like *An Introduction*, in the first chapter of the *Essays* this emphasis on an experience read into encounter dialogues translates into a power relationship between author and reader. After citing an encounter dialogue in which a master reprehends a student by calling him an “ignoramus,” Suzuki immediately moves to address the reader: “If I go on like this there will be no end. So I stop, but expect some of you to ask me the following questions [two hypothetical questions about encounter dialogues follow]. In answer, I append these two passages [two encounter dialogues].”<sup>29</sup> In this sequence, we again see how Suzuki’s concept of experience and the framed encounter dialogues condition a relationship between author and reader that is hierarchical, with the author strategically avoiding directly answering questions, just like the medieval Zen masters in the encounter dialogues.

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<sup>26</sup> Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, vol. 1 (London: Rider & Company, 1927), 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:33.

What we see in this brief summary of only the introduction of the *Essays* is the same pattern I have demonstrated for *An Introduction*.

Another example of the pattern I have identified can be found in the wildly famous *Zen and Japanese Culture*, which, according to Jaffe, sold 100,000 copies since the paperback edition of 1970 alone (it was published long before that in both English and Japanese, so the actual number is probably much higher).<sup>30</sup> In the first chapter of *Japanese Culture*, titled “What is Zen,” Suzuki provides his reader with a host of encounter dialogues, introducing the first three with the statement: “Zen verbalism expresses the most concrete experience” and concluding after quoting them: “This is what I call Zen verbalism. The philosophy of Zen comes out of it.”<sup>31</sup> As in the first chapter of the *Essays* just discussed, the manner in which the student-master relationship appears is in the ignorance of certain readers. After citing an encounter dialogue that answers the question about the Way of Zen by the assertion “When you are hungry you eat, when you are thirsty you drink, when you meet a friend you greet him,” Suzuki asserts:

This, some may think, is no more than animal instinct or social usage, and there is nothing that may be called moral, much less spiritual, in it. If we call it the Tao, some may think, what a cheap thing the Tao is after all! Those who have not penetrated into the depths of our consciousness, including both the conscious and unconscious, are liable to hold such a mistaken notion as the one just cited. But we must remember that....<sup>32</sup>

Here, Suzuki again presents himself as an authority who has indeed “penetrated into the depths of our consciousness,” whereas at least some of his readers have not. Therefore, *Japanese Culture* also displays the pattern I have identified in *An Introduction*.

Suzuki uses encounter dialogues to build a narrative of Zen in which there is only success. Even if a student in the encounter dialogues occasionally does not comprehend the master’s meaning, this is never the master’s fault. In Suzuki’s framing of the dialogues, what seems like failure is in fact a step towards enlightenment, which for him lies at the end of any

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<sup>30</sup> Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, vii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

proper practice of Zen. Van de Wetering's *The Empty Mirror*, to which I turn next, both demonstrates Suzuki's influence and contests its view of Zen. Van de Wetering counters Suzuki's certitude with doubt, offering a way of describing Zen Buddhism that leaves room for failure: the possibility that the ideal may not become real.

**Van de Wetering's *The Empty Mirror***

Suzuki offers his readers an ideal portrayal of Zen through encounter dialogues. In their predetermined role as students, readers are conduced to interpret these stories as proof for Suzuki's main points. Van de Wetering's book is different because it establishes a tension between life in a Japanese Zen monastery and the idealized stories of Zen as they appear in Suzuki's work. Van de Wetering therefore attests to Suzuki's influence while subtly critiquing the latter's portrayal of Zen, opening the door to a manner of writing about the religion that allows for a Zen experience that is unlike the one Suzuki reads into encounter dialogues.

This tension between personal experiences and encounter dialogues is present in *The Empty Mirror* from the beginning. Having just been admitted to the monastery in Kyoto where he will stay for a year, the main character of the book, Janwillem,<sup>33</sup> stands face to face with a statue that depicts, as the extradiegetic narrator informs us, "A Zen master who lived in the Middle Ages, one of the most spectacular characters from the history of Zen."<sup>34</sup> Despite the fact that Janwillem is unaware of this, he feels "threatened by the will-power of the man."<sup>35</sup> Shortly after, as Janwillem waits

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<sup>33</sup> To prevent confusion, I will henceforth refer to the autobiographical character in *The Empty Mirror* as Janwillem, and to the narrator and the author of the book as Van de Wetering. I am aware that conflating a so-called extradiegetic narrator with a real person carries great risk, but I see no other way to effectively describe this book in narratological terms. By an extradiegetic narrator, I mean a narrator who does not participate in the story, stands outside it and is all-knowing. It is the top level of the narrative structure according to the narratological system of Gérard Genette. For a useful description of focalization, see Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, *Frontiers of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 81–86.

<sup>34</sup> Janwillem Van de Wetering, *The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

for an interview with the abbot, the focalization<sup>36</sup> of the narrative shifts from a personal to an external vocalizer: the extradiegetic narrator tells us about the background of the Zen master in question, a roguish character who refused students and commissions, and who chose to live under Kyoto's bridges like a beggar.<sup>37</sup> At one point, the emperor sought his wisdom, and was told beforehand that the master likes melons. This information proves to be true when the disguised despot finds "a beggar with remarkable sparkling eyes."<sup>38</sup> What follows is typical:

He [the emperor] offered the beggar a melon and said: "Take the melon without using your hands." The beggar answered: "Give me the melon without using your hands." The emperor then donated money to build a temple and installed the master as a teacher.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This term and the narratological system it implies is that described as "structuralist" by Herman and Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, 41–102, who modify the term coined by Gérard Genette. By "focalization" they mean the viewpoint adopted by the narrator, but not identical to that narrator. For example, an all-knowing nineteenth-century narrator, who often shows his omniscience by predicting what will happen to the characters later on the book, may still choose to narrate through the eyes and bodies of the characters to maintain tension, or evoke other effects. Focalization thus has two main types, internal and external to the narrative: when the narrator views a narrative solely through the eyes of a character, he is internally focalizing; and when he tells the story through his own eyes, he is externally focalizing. Of course, as Herman and Vervaeck are very much aware, this division is problematic because it assumes that there are "centers of perception in a narrative text that approximate human beings and that apparently think and feel as we all do" (Ibid., 71).

<sup>37</sup> Though Van de Wetering never identifies this master, it is clear from the contents that Daitō Kokushi (National Teacher Daitō; 1235-1308) is meant here. For a discussion of Daitō, see Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History – Volume 2 Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 185–90.

<sup>38</sup> Van de Wetering, *The Empty Mirror*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

This story, an encounter dialogue, sets up a model for the encounter with the real abbot of the monastery. After the narrator has finished telling the story about the beggar-master, the focalization shifts once again, and we see the world through Janwillem's eyes. He is surprised, because he will actually get to see the abbot:

I had read that Zen masters live apart and do not worry about the running of the monastery. The daily routine passes them by; their task is the spiritual direction of the monks and other disciples whom they receive every day, one by one.<sup>40</sup>

Janwillem thus experiences the monastery through the lens of what he has read about Zen Buddhism. In a moment, I will show that it is Suzuki in particular who influences his expectations. Van de Wetering's book attests to Suzuki's influence, while at the same time critiquing the Japanese scholar by contrasting his ideas with the realities of the Zen monastery.

In the remainder of the first chapter, Janwillem continues to impose the knowledge he has gained by reading about Zen on his experiences in the monastery. Just before meeting the abbot, Janwillem again reflects on what this Zen master should be like: he should not like "long stories" and will prefer "methods without words."<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Janwillem expects a non-verbal treatment that might also be violent. That is why he decides to keep his statements brief:

"I am here," I said carefully, "to get to know the purpose of life. Buddhism knows that purpose, the purpose which I am trying to find, and Buddhism knows the way which leads to enlightenment" [ . . . ] To my surprise the master answered immediately. I had thought that he would be silent. When the Buddha was asked if life has, or does not have, an end, if there is, or isn't, a life after death, [ . . . ] he did not answer but maintained a "noble silence."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



This seemingly simple passage contains an important parallel: the very moment Janwillem starts speaking to the abbot, he is consciously repeating a scene he has read in books (namely the exchange between Shakyamuni and an unnamed interrogator). However, the abbot refuses to conform to the role assigned to him, and answers approvingly: “‘That’s fine’, he said. ‘Life has a purpose, but a strange purpose. When you come to the end of the road and find perfect insight you will see that enlightenment is a joke.’”<sup>43</sup> This answer does not complete the series of surprises: instead of being rigorously tested before he is allowed to become a student, Janwillem is readily admitted to the monastery, causing him to conclude: “Obviously the books which I had read about Zen were faulty, written by inexperienced writers.”<sup>44</sup>

In *The Empty Mirror*, Van de Wetering never names the “inexperienced writers” that apparently so misinformed Janwillem about the reality of Zen practice in Japan. Only much later, in 1994 and again in 1999, would Van de Wetering testify that what oriented him towards Japan in the 1950s (and not India, or any other exotic location) was reading Suzuki. He had read “Dr. D.T. Suzuki’s Zen guide”<sup>45</sup> while on the ship to Japan and when he arrived in Kyoto, he was “clutching Suzuki in [his] right armpit.”<sup>46</sup> This attachment to Suzuki as a Zen authority leads him to have a host of preconceived notions on the behavior of Zen masters and Zen practice, notions that are first proven wrong during the interview with the real Zen master in Kyoto, and that will haunt the rest of his stay in Japan.

Van de Wetering was not the only one so decisively influenced by Suzuki: in the era after the Second World War, Suzuki was the main reference for many Westerners intrigued by the religion they had come to know simply as “Zen.” But what is remarkable about *The Empty Mirror* is that it details the discovery of the misunderstandings Suzuki’s books can cause. Janwillem operates on the assumption that Suzuki’s work accurately represents the realities of life in a Zen monastery, but again and again discovers that this is not so.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Janwillem Van de Wetering, *Afterzen: Experiences of a Zen Student out on His Ear* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999), 65.

<sup>46</sup> Janwillem Van de Wetering, “Introduction,” in *The Zen Kōan as a Means of Attaining Enlightenment* (Boston: C.E. Tuttle Co., 1994).

The second chapter of *The Empty Mirror*, which is aptly titled “Meditating Hurts,” provides another example of the contrast the memoir maintains between the reality portrayed in Suzuki’s books and what Janwillem experiences in the monastery:

The first meditation is forever etched into my memory. After a few minutes the first pains started. My thighs began to tremble like violin strings. The sides of my feet became burning pieces of wood. My back, kept straight with difficulty, seemed to creak and to shake involuntarily. Time passed inconceivably slowly. There was no concentration at all.<sup>47</sup>

The books Janwillem has read do not mention this experience. In a hagiography of the Tibetan saint Milarepa, Janwillem reads that this bodhisattva is not bothered by pain: “There was nothing about pain in the legs or back, the fight with sleep, the confused and endlessly interrupting thoughts.”<sup>48</sup> Life in the monastery is tough: Janwillem sleeps some four hours per night, with an extra hour in the afternoon, meditates six painful hours in summer and more in winter, and spends the remainder of his time cleaning hallways and maintaining the monastery garden. This routine is not without results: regular meditation causes Janwillem to become “fully aware,” able to “really see objects in [his] surroundings.”<sup>49</sup> He even manages to instinctively solve a problem by improvising, something that his master considers a great accomplishment.<sup>50</sup> But what always remains beyond Janwillem’s reach and drives him to despair, is *satori*, the enlightenment experience Suzuki sees as the goal of Zen practice. He is supposed to gain it through solving the question contained in his *kōan*,<sup>51</sup> and then providing his master with the answer during a formal interview. Thus, Janwillem day after

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<sup>47</sup> Van de Wetering, *The Empty Mirror*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>51</sup> By *kōan* is meant the illogical riddles the Zen tradition is so renowned for. Those riddles were often drawn from the mysterious interactions contained in encounter dialogues. From the Song dynasty onwards, the Rinzai tradition of Zen has used these riddles to train students.

day lines up outside the master's room, goes in, bows to the master, and says nothing. In the *The Empty Mirror*, he never finds the answer.

The contrast between Janwillem's life and that of the Zen masters in the encounter dialogues reaches a climax at the end of the book.<sup>52</sup> An American colleague of Janwillem, Gerald, is depressed, and Janwillem tries to cheer him up by telling him a Zen story: a monk tries to solve his *kōan* but does not succeed despite great efforts. He therefore leaves the monastery and goes to live in a temple. Over time, he forgets the *kōan* and instead spends his days taking care of his new abode. But one day, the sound of a pebble sends *satori* surging through his being. Gerald, however, is not impressed by this story and tells two more recent stories: one describes a monk trying to solve the *kōan* "stop the Inter-city train coming from Tokyo." He works on the riddle for many years, to no avail, and finally throws himself underneath said high-speed train. The second story is about a headstrong monk, whose master often punished him with a small hard cane. One day, the master strikes too hard, and the monk dies. No one is held accountable, because "the police know that there is an extraordinary relationship between master and pupil, a relationship outside the law."<sup>53</sup>

Thus, in the conclusion of *The Empty Mirror*, disappointment enters the level of the *mise en abyme*, which from then on can no longer function as a normative ideal. At that point, the tension between ideal and reality that the book has maintained for such a long time collapses, and the story ends. Having never known *satori*, Janwillem leaves the monastery and gets on a ship bound for his native Holland. The last sentence of *The Empty Mirror* brings us back to everyday European life: "I went into the bar and ordered a cold beer."<sup>54</sup> His departure is the completion of a long process. By writing

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<sup>52</sup> Van de Wetering, *The Empty Mirror*, 132–34.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 145. In the follow-up volume to *The Empty Mirror*, *A Glimpse of Nothingness*, Van de Wetering does solve his *kōan* while staying in an American Zen community. Although "according to the Zen books I had read and the stories I had heard solving a *kōan* is accompanied by *satori*, enlightenment," for Janwillem solving the *kōan* has minimal results: "I had to admit that nothing had changed very much. Perhaps I might now have a more intense realization of relativity, a better idea of the non-importance of what concerned me. But that was nothing new. Detachment is caused by a slow process, and the results of this process, if any, are gradual. It was quite

the Zen history of a failure, Van de Wetering shows that there is a significant gap between Zen's ideals and reality. Thus, he reveals the one-dimensional nature of representations such as Suzuki's, which only discuss success and not failure.

In *The Empty Mirror* encounter dialogues no longer figure as "mirrors in the text." Instead of reflecting the contents, they invert them. Dällenbach does not allow for this possibility. For him, the literary work cannot be riven by internal division, a structuralist assumption that underlies his study. Therefore, Van de Wetering's book requires a different method of reading the framed stories. Throughout this article, I have argued that the contrast between encounter dialogues and reality in Van de Wetering's novel is a manner of critiquing books like Suzuki's that idealize Zen. Van de Wetering's narrative of a failed Buddhist creates the possibility for a different, more balanced, type of Zen narrative.

The uniqueness of Van de Wetering's approach can be illustrated by a brief comparison with three other testimonies by Westerners who also went to Japan to study Zen. None of their testimonies include encounter dialogues, and all of them end with *satori*. These two differences indicate that in these stories, the ideal of Zen does become reality, and mark the uniqueness of *The Empty Mirror*, which maintains a tension between ideal (encounter dialogues) and reality (the experiences in the monastery).

Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen* (1967) presents itself as "a book setting forth the authentic doctrines and practices of Zen from the mouths of the masters themselves [ . . . ] as well as to show them come alive in the minds and bodies of men and women of today."<sup>55</sup> The latter part of the book therefore contains "Eight Contemporary Enlightenment Experiences of Japanese and Westerners," already suggesting that the outcome of each of these testimonies will be *satori*. As a sample of these testimonies, Kapleau's own account, collected under the heading "Mr. P.K., An American Ex-

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possible that I was merely imagining my improved sense of detachment." Though *A Glimpse of Nothingness* deserves its own study, I would like to point out that in this book also maintains a tension between ideal (solving a *kōan* results in *satori*) and reality (solving a *kōan* changes nothing). See Janwillem Van de Wetering, *A Glimpse of Nothingness: Experiences in an American Zen Community*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1975), 55.

<sup>55</sup> Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), xv–xvi.

Businessman,” serves well.<sup>56</sup> Like Van de Wetering, Kapleau has read and heard a lot about Zen before going to Japan. He is also familiar with Suzuki’s work.<sup>57</sup> When Kapleau arrives in a Japanese monastery, he and a friend therefore try to “test” a Zen master by using their book knowledge, something that turns out disappointing.<sup>58</sup>

A further similarity to Van de Wetering’s book is that Kapleau describes his first experiences with meditation as “miserable.”<sup>59</sup> However, eventually Kapleau conquers his *kōan*, whereafter joy surges through him, changing his life forever.<sup>60</sup> He then becomes a Zen master in an established lineage. His Canadian wife, Delancey Kapleau, who writes the eighth testimonial in the book, undergoes a similar evolution, with *satori* at the end.<sup>61</sup> Although these narratives show that *satori* is indeed possible, they also tantalize the reader into seeking valuation in *satori* as the only goal of their Zen practice. In the testimonies of Philip and Delancey Kapleau, one detects an obsession with *satori*, the experience that, they are both certain, will change their life. Both testimonies read as detective stories, where the culprit remains elusive until at last he is caught and the world is put right. One imagines that readers of this book who started to practice Zen held on to *satori* in a similar manner, and there must have been those who failed in their quest. In *The Empty Mirror*, Van de Wetering gives a voice to this silent group, and thus pioneers a new type of Zen narrative.

Like Kapleau’s book, Robert Aitken’s Zen manual *Taking the Path of Zen* (1982) contains a short account of the author’s own experiences with Zen training. Aitken’s testimony is similar to those of Kapleau and Van de Wetering, but shares its happy ending only with the former. As an American prisoner-of-war during World War II, Aitken encounters Zen in Kobe, Japan, where a guard loans him a copy of R.H. Blyth’s *Zen in English Literature*.<sup>62</sup> After having met Blyth, coincidentally also a prisoner in Kobe, Aitken

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 208–29. Kapleau indicates that this is his own experience on page 190.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 208–9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 210–11.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 227–29.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 254–68.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), 115.

resolves to study Zen in Japan and is encouraged by Suzuki, who helps him obtain a scholarship after the war ends.<sup>63</sup> In Japan, Aitken meets Kapleau and studies under many Japanese masters, eventually obtaining an enlightenment experience and becoming an authenticated Zen teacher. Again, Aitken's account is similar to Van de Wetering's in some respects: both first encounter Zen through books and then travel to Japan to learn more. However, *The Empty Mirror* never shows us an enlightenment experience, again indicating how unique Van de Wetering's memoir is within the subgenre of Zen memoirs written by westerners. Moreover, like the Kapleaus, Aitken does not include encounter dialogues in his testimony. He does not need to – for him the ideal experience Suzuki reads into encounter dialogues becomes reality.

### Conclusion

This article has explored Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* with Van de Wetering's *The Empty Mirror* by comparing the manner in which both texts frame encounter dialogues. Suzuki's manner of framing was one of reflection: for him, the stories constitute the reality of Zen, which for him lies in a modern Japanese notion of religious experience. In Van de Wetering's book, this move was impossible, because the latter maintains a significant contrast between ideal reality and daily existence in the monastery. Paired with this analysis of experience was the use of Lucien Dällenbach's *The Mirror in the Text* to investigate the function of encounter dialogues. Whereas in Suzuki's book the inset encounter dialogues determines the relationship between author and reader (thus showing the marks of a specific type of *mise en abyme*, namely the "transposition"), in *The Empty Mirror* this was impossible because the ideal reality of encounter dialogues found no reflection in Janwillem's existence. As a result, it was revealed that a more effective way to see the function of failure in Van de Wetering's book is through critiquing narratives of Zen comparable to Suzuki's, thus presenting a more balanced Zen, where monks have weaknesses and ideals do not represent all of reality.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 117.