

VOL.9

Zen and five cats

Japan's post-tsunami state of mind

In the last few months Japanese bookstores have been offering noticeably more books on the topic of bushido (the “way of the warrior” philosophy of Edo period samurai) and the lives of famous samurai, with volumes dealing with the spiritual culture that dominated Japan for over 250 years from 1600 to 1867. In line with this, attention is turning once again to the book *Zen and Japanese Culture*, penned by D. T. Suzuki in 1925. Aimed at introducing Zen to the outside world, *Zen and Japanese Culture* was an overnight sensation. Even if they haven't read this book, every French person knows that Zen is synonymous with serenity, tranquility of mind, and an acute awareness of the fleeting nature of life. It's not only the French: every non-Japanese, including those who know virtually nothing about Japan, understands that Japan and the culture of Zen are inseparable. One could go so far as to say that Zen is more highly valued outside of Japan than in it. However, the vast majority of those spearheading the modernization of Japan from the Meiji Restoration (1867) onward attempted to sideline Japanese culture in favor of all things Western. And following its defeat in World War II in 1945, absorbing the culture and technology of the American victors became imperative for Japan. The end result was an absurd glorification of mass consumerism, a culture in which Descartes' “I think therefore I am” was replaced by “I buy, therefore I am”.

Back to the future

But in recent years, vapid, facile pleasure of this sort has begun to lose its luster. Times changed in two stages, courtesy of two shocking events. The first of these was the collapse of the “bubble economy” in the 1980s. It was at this point that the people of Japan, by then seemingly unable to survive without expensive cars, luxury brand bags, and celebrity hair stylist salons, realized that there was more to life than material pleasure. The second shock was the despair caused by the sudden loss of 30,000 lives in the tsunami of March 11, 2011. This was swiftly followed by another blow in

the form of what is now a permanent fear of radiation in soil, water and foodstuffs. Not to mention widespread unease at the possibility of another major quake. Since March 2011, Japan has in fact been assailed by 6,500 earthquakes.

These tragic events have affected the Japanese at both a conscious and unconscious level. Vital philosophical questions have been revived. What is the meaning of life? What meaning should we endow our lives with? We all have to die sometime. Having forgotten this fact in the decades since the end of the war, the Japanese are now sensing the need to embrace values that offer refuge when times get tough.

These values will not necessarily be identical to those of people in the West, educated in accordance with Judeo-Christian tradition. Western values were brought to Japan along with Western culture, but are not necessarily compatible with the Confucian-influenced Japanese system. The shock of the tsunami made the Japanese people aware of the importance of revisiting values that existed in Japan before the country threw open its doors to the outside world. Take for example the Shinto belief system, which has a strong animist element. According to Shinto, gods are present everywhere in nature, and so great importance is attached to nature. Both Buddhist and Zen thought were influenced by this peculiarly Japanese spiritual climate, with its strong links to the natural world, and this led to the idea of transience, the evanescent character of both things and people. In this context, it seems only natural that D. T. Suzuki's book, preaching Zen philosophy, should suddenly garner so much attention.

An episode Suzuki writes of in his book illustrates the samurai mindset, and offers a model of authentic Zen thought.

Long ago in Japan there was a samurai by the name of Shoken. Shoken had one major concern: a very large and rather ferocious rat that was gnawing at everything it could find in his house.

Shoken ordered his pet cat to deal to the rodent, but after taking one look at the beast, it fled with a frightened howl. Shoken then decided to enlist the aid of neighborhood cats that were reputed to be brave and skilled at rat-catching. However, all of them beat a hasty retreat after facing the monster rat. Shoken next decided to chase the rat around himself, brandishing his sword. But darting left and right, it managed to escape the falling blade every time.

As a last resort, Shoken called for a cat renowned for



its amazing powers as a rat-catcher. When the cat turned up, it looked no different than any other, and Shoken harbored little expectation of success. Slowly and quietly, feigning nonchalance, so to speak, the cat entered the room where the rat was hiding. Seeing this calm and self-possessed feline, said rat was overcome by fear, and froze on the spot. A few seconds later, the cat took the rat in its mouth and exited the room. That night, all the cats gathered at Shoken's house, and asking their successful comrade to take the seat of honor, said, “O great cat, we all tried but failed. Tell us the secret of your triumph!” The great cat replied, “What you have all learned is technique. Your minds are consciously planning how to bring down the enemy. But even taking technique as far as it will go, what do you achieve? Skill involves using the brain; pay all your attention to it and you will lose

the “way”, the main thread. Nor can you bring down a rat purely through the power of your spirit. As the saying goes, the worm will turn: a cornered rat will attack a cat. A rat that has been chased into a corner and has nothing to lose will beat a cat through sheer spirit. Nor can you use the technique of tempering your own heart (spiritual strength), enveloping the enemy in gentleness until there is no enmity left in them, because the conscious effort to embrace the other person works to your disadvantage. Just as a river flows inevitably to the sea, one must transcend consciousness to reach a natural state.”

Polishing up one's skills, attaining spiritual fulfillment, and fine-tuning one's heart (spiritual powers) to reach the edge of “selflessness” where there is no awareness of self: this is the spirit of the samurai that lies behind Zen.

Francoise Morechand (Fashion essayist)

Born 1936 in Montparnasse, Paris. Came to Japan in 1958 after studying Japanese at the Sorbonne. Worked as a teacher on NHK's Tanoshii Furansugo French language education series, and lecturer in French at Ochanomizu Women's University, before returning to France in 1964. Came to Japan again in 1974 to manage Chanel's beauty department there. With a career spanning French teacher, TV “tarento”, writer, and fashion coordinator, in 2004 Morechand's longstanding contribution to Franco-Japanese cultural ties was recognised by the French government with the awarding of the Légion d'honneur. Visiting professor at Kyoritsu Women's University. Overseas trade advisor to the French government. North Asia representative for the Conseil Supérieur des Français de l'Étranger (CSFE). International advisor to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Ishikawa Prefecture tourism ambassador.

Yasuko Sensyu (Illustrator)

Leading creator of adorable “healing art”. All her work, starting with calligraphy employing her Level 7 calligraphic skills, and including her illustrations and essays, is suffused with a warmth that soothes whoever picks it up. Her diverse portfolio includes paintings for the interior of Le Comptoir de Benoit, chef Alain Ducasse's first restaurant venture in Osaka; murals at the En-Japan head office, plus illustrating, brand logos, wall paintings and essays. She was also responsible for the “Japan Trump” playing cards showcasing famous sightseeing spots nationwide (supported by the Japan National Tourism Organization), extending this concept further across Asia with a sub-brand for the Singaporean tourism office, and Indonesian Trump cards.

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