We can find an extended example of Suzuki’s address of a Western audience in the piece God Giving. We know that Buddhists don’t believe in a monotheistic personal God; nevertheless, Suzuki can employ the term God as skillful means (upāya) to reach his Western audience. The doctrine of skillful means became key in Mahāyāna Buddhism. How could Mahāyāna, which arose centuries after the death of the Buddha revise the Word of the Buddha, as transmitted in the early Pāli canon? The doctrine of skillful means responded to this problem, suggesting that early Buddhist teachings did not express the way things are in their fullness; the Buddha used these simplified teachings as skillful means to lead beings to enlightenment. Likewise, Suzuki is comfortable using the language of Western monotheism to teach the Buddhist dharma, the truth or teaching of the way things are.

He begins by declaring that every existence is given to us, even everything we create. At the same time, we are always giving out; life is continual creation. However, the “I” that creates is not the small I but the big I. There is actually a oneness to all things, and we experience this in the big I. When we give, we experience a oneness with what we give.¹

Strictly speaking, Buddhism teaches that there is no self or “I.” All of reality is characterized by three marks of existence: impermanence (anitya/anicca), frustration (dukkha) and no-self or selflessness (anātman/anatta), which means the lack of a substantial, unchanging identity. All things are in a constant process of change; there is no underlying fixed identity to any element of the universe. Thus reality is a network of mutually causing, interdependent events.

Human beings, like all beings, are also characterized by a lack of permanent self or identity. What gives us the illusion of a self is the interaction of various activities of our being known as aggregates or bundles of energy (skandhas): bodily phenomena (rūpa), feelings (vedanā), labeling or recognizing (samjñā/saññā) volitional activities (samskāra, saṅkhāra) and consciousness (vijñāna/viññāna). We arrive at the notion of a self from the interaction of these various activities, but there is no “ghost in the
machine” who is a real “I” or individual. Hindus had seen consciousness as fundamental, the real unchanging eternal Self. Buddhists, in contrast, insist that consciousness arises with each event of sensation: visual consciousness arises with seeing, auditory consciousness with hearing. The unchanging, substantial “I” is just something we infer from events of subject-object interaction.

Nevertheless, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the notion of “Buddha mind” or “Buddha nature” arises. Buddhists will deny that this is a substantial, eternal Self like the Hindu ātman; it is simply the nature of awakening that is at the heart of all reality. It is perhaps this concept of Buddha nature or original nature that allows Suzuki to speak of a great “I,” to be contrasted with the small sense of “I” arising from reifying the fluid aspects of our being. We have seen that Dōgen describes his enlightenment experience as a shedding of body-mind, which allows for a greater mind—the Buddha mind or Buddha nature—to express itself. Suzuki thus follows Dōgen in saying that when we give, we experience a oneness of all things in the big “I.” This is because when we experience the unity of giver and receiver, we become one with the act of giving.

Suzuki then takes an interesting hermeneutical turn. He turns back to his opening statement and now attributes it to Christianity: according to Christianity, every existence in nature was created for or given to us by God. But by splitting off God from humans, we unwittingly build up our own egos. That is, we think we achieve humility by attributing creativity to God, and thinking of ourselves as separate. But our very identity as separate leads to the over-inflation of our sense of ourselves as creators—“we” create cars and planes, paintings and books—and we forget about God. We forget about the big I, the fact that creation is actually a process of receiving. It is because we have forgotten the genuine value of creativity that we become attached to material or exchange value.

Notice the fluid way Suzuki can use concepts as skillful means. Suzuki slides seamlessly from “God” to “Big I;” writing about giving as non-attachment, he models non-attachment in the flexibility of his metaphysical language. Some Buddhist teachers are adamant that Buddhism does not hold an idea of God or Self. American students of Buddhism in particular tend to distance themselves from what they see as primitive anthropomorphic theism. Suzuki models a more subtle reading of Christianity. The Christian
God is the Source of all, and one can call the Source God, as long as we remember that God is the genuine source of value, the big “I” from which all comes. “I” here should not be regarded as an inflated ego—a lurking danger when human beings identify their individual selves with divinity. Rather, the big I is an embracing source we discover when we create. We can enjoy creation as long as we realize it stems from a source larger than us, which provides genuine value. Creativity is a gift of the universe; perhaps the union one experiences when giving is an example of what Czikzentmihalyi calls flow experience. In the process of giving, we experience the oneness of genuine engagement. v

Suzuki relates this teaching to the act of sitting in zazen. The fundamental religious practice of Zen, particularly the Sōtō school of Zen, is to sit in meditation. We have seen that Dōgen made this the heart of his practice, and stressed the identity of sitting and realization. vi Suzuki suggests to his students that when we sit in meditation, we are almost unaware we are here. We enter an experience of unity or being nothing; we are not aware of ourselves as separate from anything else. Thus the first mode of creation is when we arise out of meditation. “When you are there, everything else is there; everything is created at once.”vii There is always a surprise when we arise from meditation or contemplation that the world is still here; the most fundamental act of creation is to bring our awareness to the world, to be present.

Contrary to the view that Buddhism is other-worldly, Suzuki affirms our creativity in the world. This is not simply a modern stance. We can note the influence of Daoism and Zen Buddhism on the arts of calligraphy and painting; these arts suggest a creative engagement with the world that pre-dates purely modernist constructions of Buddhism, while also finding resonance in contemporary Western culture. Suzuki inherits from Dōgen a positive valuation of the beauty and value of this world: “this great earth with all its mountains and rivers is the Buddha nature. . .since this is the way things are, to look at the mountains and rivers is to look at Buddha Nature.”viii

Suzuki often stresses that true creativity emerges from nothingness: “when we emerge from nothing, when everything emerges from nothing, we see it all as a fresh new creation. This is non-attachment.” ix In the Daoist and Buddhist notion, all emerges from an emptiness that is not literally
nothing but pure potentiality, and thus fullness. When we realize that at each moment we emerge mysteriously from pure potentiality, we can see each moment afresh, with curious, open minds.

The second kind of creation, Suzuki suggests, is to act, for example creating food or tea for someone. The third is to create something within oneself, such as art, education, or culture. But we most often forget the first—the creation of ourselves from nothing, from the Big I. We forget that all creativity stems from the miracle of creating ourselves each moment from our source:

Usually everyone forgets about \textit{zazen}. Everyone forgets about God. They work very hard at the second and third kinds of creation, but God does not help the activity. How is it possible for Him to help when He does not realize who He is? That is why we have so many problems in this world. When we forget the fundamental source of our creating, we are like children who do not know what to do when they lose their parents.

Notice how seamlessly Suzuki moves from forgetting “zazen” to forgetting “God.” The implication of Suzuki’s words is that the Western notion of God connotes the big I that we have lost, who cannot help us because we are not aware of it. Note, too, how Suzuki has subtly transformed the notion of God as creator. The first thing the big I creates is us; we create ourselves from nothing. We can see how Suzuki has fashioned his presentation of Sōtō Zen for a modern American audience, for whom the theme of self-creation from nothing would find easy resonance. Suzuki may also be drawing from Dōgen the notion of authenticity in self-creation, an ideal that would resonate for Suzuki’s American students.

Suzuki has structured the entire talk on the Sanskrit phrase “\textit{dāna prajñā pāramitā}.” The term \textit{pāramitā} means both perfection and crossing over to the other shore; \textit{prajñā} means wisdom; \textit{dāna} means giving. \textit{Dāna pāramitā} (or more fully: \textit{dāna prajñā pāramitā}) is thus the perfection of wisdom that is giving; it is one of the six Buddhist perfections that those who have taken the vow to become \textit{Bodhisattvas}—compassionate teachers of wisdom—strive to achieve: non-attachment as perfect giving. We practice non-attachment when we give in a pure way, when we realize the source from which our giving flows. Suzuki also adds a Zen interpretation to the notion of \textit{pāramitā} as crossing to the other shore. The true wisdom of life, he explains, is to realize that we reach the other shore in every step we take. The goal of Zen is not to reach a shore—\textit{nirvāṇa}—that is on the other bank of the river. True
wisdom lies in the process, the crossing itself. This is faithful to Dōgen’s notion that enlightenment is simply a process of verifying, confirming, or authenticating our true nature.

Suzuki traces to Dōgen the notion that “to produce something, to participate in human activity is also dāna prajñā pāramitā. To provide a ferryboat for people, or to make a bridge for people is ‘dāna prajñā pāramitā.’” He adds that to give one line of teaching may be to make a ferryboat for someone. Indeed, Dōgen dedicates one chapter of the Shōbōgenzō to four of the six pāramitā (translated by one scholar as “integrative methods,” by another as “exemplary acts”): giving, kind speech, beneficial action, and cooperation; and in the category of giving, Dōgen includes setting up a ferry or building a bridge; he adds that earning a living and all productive work are fundamentally giving, and that giving a single phrase or verse of the teaching (dharma) is a treasure. If one gives a word of teaching, this may sprout into that person’s enlightenment; we never know where the seed of inspiration will sprout.

Here we can see how Suzuki has transmitted the teachings of Dōgen for contemporary America. It is true that Dōgen acknowledges that any creative effort can be an act of giving—including building a bridge or a ferry and doing productive work in the world. However, Suzuki has not noted that in its original context, including in Dōgen’s discourse, the first practice of perfection is not just giving but almsgiving. American Buddhists do not talk much about the context of Buddhism in traditional cultures, in which the average person receives merit from giving alms to monks, who are supported by the community. Thus there is a two-tiered structure of religious striving: laypeople receive merit for supporting monks, while monks strive for enlightenment through the practice of meditation. Mahāyāna Buddhism did relax this structure, de-emphasizing the necessity for monasticism, and engaging monks in productive work, which allows them to achieve enlightenment through “chopping wood and carrying water.” And Dōgen here is specifically broadening the notion of giving to include all productive work in the world. Suzuki, writing for an American audience, simply follows Dōgen’s graceful broadening of the concept, a gesture found in many Mahāyāna teachings.

We find an interesting cultural parallel in the Bhagavad Gīta. In the ninth teaching, Krishna suggests that any act of giving will be accepted by Krishna like the supreme act of non-attachment. This
was a radically democratic move—opening up the possibility of liberation to anyone who offers a flower or fruit.xx In Dōgen and Suzuki too, we see the move to draw a continuum between the act of ordinary, material giving, the sharing of Buddhist teaching (dharma), and the supreme non-attachment that is the Buddhist way of life.xxi

Suzuki adds that when we practice such non-attachment and recognize that everything that we do or give is from the big I, we cease to create problems for ourselves. What we need is to recognize our true value and the source of creation. We don’t need to create to bolster up a small sense of self. Rather creation is giving, and in giving we discover genuine value. A further key to giving oneself to the moment is to daily let go of what we have done and find something new in each day. Then each moment is approached afresh, with beginner’s mind.xxii

This extension of the notion of giving, too, has a source in Dōgen. Dōgen suggests that when we have learned giving well, being born (or accepting oneself, accepting a body) and dying (letting go of oneself, to give up the body) are both giving. When a person who gives comes into a group, the people first looks to that person, for the heart and mind implicitly comes across, communicating subtly with others.xxiii The simple practice of non-attachment is an act of giving, and a person who gives radiates that quality in their very being. In the original Buddhist context, this statement was made with respect to a donor who enters an assembly of monks. But Dōgen seems to have made the extension that living in a graceful way is an act of giving to the world, which is picked up by Suzuki as a fitting teaching for contemporary Americans.

---

i Zen Mind, 65.
ii Moreover we have seen that Dōgen insists that Buddha nature is a process of experiencing the changing reality; Buddha nature is itself the process of change.
iii Zen Mind, 65.
iv Zen Mind, 66-67
vi See Dōgen, Bendōwa, 133-48; Heart of Shōbōgenzō, 11-23; Moon in a Dewdrop, 145-54; Treasury, 5-15; Nearman, 4-14; Zazen-gi (“Principles of Zazen”), tr. Abe and Waddell in Eastern Buddhist Volume 6, no 2 (1973), 127-128; Heart of Shōbōgenzō, 109-110; Kim, Flowers of Emptiness, 157-65; (“Rules for Zazen”) in Moon in a Dewdrop, 29-30; Treasury, 579-80; Kim, Flowers of Emptiness, 153-56.
These words recall an almost identical saying by the first century Jewish teacher Hillel, “If I am here, all is here; if I am not here, what is here?” BT Sukkah 53a: Avot de Rabbi Nathan, ed. S. Schechter Ver. A, 12; Ver B, 27; JT Sukkah 55b. See comments of David Flusser comparing Jesus’ exalted self-perception with that of Hillel. “Hillel’s Self-Awareness and Jesus,” Immanuel 4 (1974): 31-36, at 34; reprinted in Judaism and the Origins of Christianity, 512. Both statements show the centrality of consciousness; awareness is at the heart of our world.

Shōbōgenzō, On Buddha Nature (Bussho), Part 1, tr. Abe and Waddell, Eastern Buddhist, Volume 8, no. 2 (1975), 105-6; Heart of Shōbōgenzō, 67; Treasury, 238; tr. Nearman, tr. 249-50; Flowers of Emptiness, 78. On the question of aesthetics and Buddhist modernism, see David McMahan in The Making of Buddhist Modernism. McMahan has suggested that the emphasis on positive valuation of the present moment is a peculiarly modernist construction. The appreciation of each moment of everyday life is central to the descriptions of mindfulness by popular meditation teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Likewise, McMahan notes an almost sensuous appreciation of this world in descriptions of mindfulness by the contemporary teacher Lama Suray Das (Jeffery Miller), and a similar heightened appreciation of present sensations in descriptions by Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield. (216). He describes this appreciation of present reality as a modernist response to the desacralization and disenchantment of reality. McMahan is here drawing upon Charles Taylor’s description of two new views that arose during the Protestant Reformation: affirmation of the value of ordinary life, and the notion that sacredness and dignity can be found not in an afterlife but in this life. Romantic and Modernist authors and poets reflect a similar emphasis on the mystery and value of the present moment of experience. (218-221). McMahan notes critiques by Thanissaro Bikkhu of a Romantic strain of Buddhism in contemporary discourse. Thanissaro Bikkhu stresses that in classical sources, mindfulness was not practiced for the purpose of appreciation of this world, but for seeing the impermanence of all things (McMahan, 248; Thanissaro Bikkhu, “Romancing the Buddha? Tricycle 12 (Winger 2002): 45-47, 106-11, at 108-111). However, McMahan notes that the devaluing of this world of saṃsāra and monastic asceticism was revised to a certain extent by Mahāyāna Buddhism, which stresses the identity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and the Boddhisattva’s work of compassion in this world. Thus Mahāyāna and Zen discourse is not as far from contemporary emphasis on the value of this world that we find in current mindfulness meditation. (234) The appreciation of the value of this world is especially heightened in Zen; McMahan does Dōgen for his appreciation of the beauty of this world’s mountains and rivers (McMahan, 161-2). Nevertheless, he does not find evidence in traditional texts for the use of mindfulness to appreciate the moment and do one’s work with skillful ease.

We find an interesting parallel to traditional vs modernist constructions of mindfulness in a debate between Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem over the valuing of this world in the eighteenth century Hasidism. This pietist movement was influenced by the Kabbalistic teaching that sparks of holiness have been trapped in the lower, material world and are awaiting return to their heavenly source. Buber drew parallels between Zen and Hasidic tales, and construed Hasidim as appreciating the value of discovering God through communing with the everyday aspects of this world. However, Gershom Scholem responded that Buber’s Romantic vision of Hasidism does not square with historical Hasidism. Traditional Hasidic texts are not concerned with the appreciation of this worldly pleasure, but freeing the sparks of holiness from an inferior, unredeemed world. Similarly, early Buddhist texts taught mindfulness of mental processes in order to see their insubstantiality, not to appreciate their beauty and wonder. See Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality, 228-40 and Buber’s response, Martin Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” Commentary 36: 218-223, in which Buber writes that his goal was not to reflect the history of Hasidism but to “recapture a sense of the power that once gave it the capacity to take hold of and vitalize the life of diverse classes of people. 218. See Rachel White, “Recovering the Past, Renewing the Present: the Buber-Scholem Controversy over Hasidism Reinterpreted,” Jewish Studies Quarterly, Volume 14: 364-392, 364 note 4 for bibliography on the vast literature on this controversy.
Perhaps in this context he is drawing a parallel to the medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic view of creation ex nihilo, expressed in Quranic statement, “God says, ‘Be,’ and being is.” 2:117- The Initiator of the heavens and the earth: to have anything done, He simply says to it, "Be," and it is.

- 3:47- She said, "My Lord, how can I have a son, when no man has touched me?" He said, "God thus creates whatever He wills. To have anything done, He simply says to it, 'Be,' and it is."

- 6:73- He is the One who created the heavens and the earth, truthfully. Whenever He says, "Be," it is. His word is the absolute truth. All sovereignty belongs to Him the day the trumpet is blown. Knower of all secrets and declarations, He is the Most Wise, the Cognizant.

- 16:40- To have anything done, we simply say to it, "Be," and it is.

- 19:35- It does not befit God that He begets a son, be He glorified. To have anything done, He simply says to it, "Be," and it is."

- 36:82- All He needs to do to carry out any command is say to it, "Be," and it is.

- 40:68- He is the only One who controls life and death. To have anything done, He simply says to it, "Be," and it is.

xi We might compare these with Viktor Frankl’s suggestion of three ways to find meaning in life: 1) by creating a work of significance or carrying out an action; 2) by experiencing something of value or encountering someone; and 3) by one’s attitude toward unavoidable suffering. For Frankl as an existentialist thinker, these are three ways in which we create who we are. See Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy, 111.

xii Zen Mind, 67.

xiii This is also a theme prominent in modern existentialist thought. Thus Frances Cook has suggested that Dōgen’s notion of the authentic self—contrasted to an inauthentic, constructed self—has parallels with Heidegger’s notion of authenticity. Francis Cook, “Dōgen’s View of Authentic Selfhood and its Socio-ethnical Implications,” Dōgen Studies, ed. William La Fleur. Compare Ellen Langer on authenticity in On Becoming an Artist, 22-40. Suzuki is at the same time stressing a theme common to many forms of mysticism—the notion that we have lost the true source of our vitality and creativity. While as we have noted, Buddhism is hesitant to speak of this as a “self,” Buddhist thought is comfortable with speaking of a genuine nature—Buddha mind or Buddha nature. Moreover, the notion of a true infinite source of vital energy goes back to the Daodejing’s “endless source of inexhaustible energy” (Daodejing, chapter 6). Philosophical Daoism was a significant source for Ch’an and Zen teachings, including those of Dogen and Suzuki.

xiv Prajñā pāramitā is the perfection of wisdom. It is the name of a certain body of Buddhist literature; it also refers to the practice of six Buddhist perfections. These are usually referred to as the six perfections that those who have taken the vow to become Boddhisattvas—compassionate teachers of wisdom—practice and strive to embody. Pāramitā means to cross over to the other shore; pāramitā may also be
translated as perfection, perfect realization, or reaching beyond limitation. In the words of Dale Wright, “on one account, pāramitā derives from pāram, meaning “the other side” plus the past participle itā, meaning “gone.” From this perspective, something is perfected when it has “gone to the other side,” that is, when it has fully transcended what it would be in ordinary lives. Others, however, link pāramitā to the term pārama, which means “excellent,” or “supreme,” such that something is perfected when it arrives at the state of excellence or supremacy. But whatever its etymology, the word pāramitā soon became a technical term in Buddhist ethics naming the dimensions of human character that are most important in the state of enlightenment.” Dale Wright, The Six Perfections: Buddhism and the Cultivation of Character, 6. On the perfection of giving (dāna pāramitā), see Wright, Chapter 1, “The Perfection of Generosity.” Suzuki explains six pāramitās are six ways of true living.

xv See also Wright, 7.

xvi Zen Mind, 66.


xviii This is the way the phrase is popularly translated. However, an anonymous reader noted to me that the phrase should be more precisely translated as “gathering firewood and heaving water.”

xix For example, Dōgen cites King Ashoka’s offering of half a mango to a group of monks.


xxi See also Wright, 18, 20.

xxii Zen Mind, 71.

xxiii Tr. Cleary, 117; Moon in a Dewdrop, 44-45; Treasury, 474; Nearman, 572. Dōgen attributes this to the Buddha. See Ekottaragama Sutra 24. But we should notice that this universalistic translation is that of Thomas Cleary; a more literal translation notes the original Buddhist context: that when a donor comes into a monastic assembly, others admire that person, tacitly knowing their heart. Social psychologist Ellen Langer has done research demonstrated that even animals prefer to be with humans who are taking a mindful approach. On Becoming an Artist, 25-31.