

# NEW GODS IN AMERICA

An informal investigation  
into the new religions of  
American youth today

PETER ROWLEY



ROWLEY

## CHAPTER XXI

# Zen

"You and your wife should take the hot bath, considering the outrageous price we're charging you," said Jim Lake (not his real name), the slightly unshaven monk at Zen Mountain Center, which was not on a mountain but at the bottom of one, in a valley near Carmel, California.

We had driven over a tortuous fourteen-mile mountain road, rising to five thousand feet, expecting from the brochure and the thirty-eight-dollars-a-night price at least a beautiful view, comfortable rooms, quiet monks, and long shadows. Instead, as we tumbled down the dusty trail into the ex-health resort-camp I was reminded of a mixture of Tobacco Road, hippiedom, and Zen. Which element was triumphing seemed uncertain. We were late for dinner.

"Have some more spaghetti and meatballs," said the young Zen student mockingly to my wife, lifting some limp cold strands with a fork from the side of the jar. Opposite us another student was flirting with a very young girl about nine years old who had long flaxen hair.

I was given a tour of the baths. A naked young man, was sinking and smiling back into the hot waters of a large health bath. Next door in a smaller room lit by a kerosene lamp, two men were standing naked in a bath. One was shaving the other's head—soapy blobs of hair being removed.

"Don't take the lamp. He'll cut my head open," said one bather to the monk with me.

On the wall was a legend about an Indian Chief who ruled the world under the protection of the Sun Deity and had among his other great talents the ability to see the grass grow. He also had a sister, who fell ill. He called in all the medicine men who searched far and wide for a herb, but none of them worked. Finally the Chief decided to take his sister to the Great Pacific Ocean, but before they got there she became so ill they had to stop. She was dying. The Chief fell to his knees pledging his life to God if the girl was saved. Suddenly his body stiffened, turned into stone, and warm golden tears flowed from it. The sister lived and thus Tassajara Hot Springs came into being—the site of the Zen monastery.

There was a smell. Sulphur?

"It's like excrement," I said to my wife, as we went to bed by kerosene light, the lights not working due to the absence of electricity. The hot water—under the previous owner—had long since ceased to work.

From outside came the sound of a rushing stream. Towering above us were the trees soaring up the almost-parched mountainside. There were thick swarms of flies.

The next morning the grinning monk informed me, "The Zen master cannot see you till tomorrow. He is busy today."

"You told me over the long distance telephone you were ninety-nine percent sure he could see me today. At thirty-eight dollars a night we're leaving."

A few minutes later, having just passed by the trash dump fifty yards from the camp, I was approached by the Zen master, a tiny smiling man, and the guestmaster, Stan White, a charming middle-aged man. "Master Suzuki can see you after all today." We agreed on a different price.

Master Suzuki Roshi was an elderly man who used a Japanese fan, sometimes rubbed a white pebble between his fingers, and who once killed a fly and then brushed it gently away with his hand.

He said, "I came to San Francisco in 1959. My first young person was a girl who turned up and said, 'My husband wants to go to Japan to study Zen.' I replied, 'Instead he should stay here and see me. Why don't you study too?' She did. After a week or two the husband turned up, running into his wife—"What are you doing here?" So he started with me, and stayed with his wife in this country. His name was McNair, though eventually he left Zen.

"I came here because the Japanese are more interested in the social side of Zen at the Temple than Zazen. They come to the temple only if you give them food and have a Zen Party."

"What is the purpose of Zen?" I asked.

The Zen master shrugged his shoulders, spreading both palms up, and smiled.

In the office were Lewis and Amy Richmond; Lewis was Harvard '67. They had been at the Zen Center for months.

"We have come closer together since starting Zen," said Amy, who had expressive eyes.

Lewis said, "We will probably stay in Zen for the rest of our lives, but it is uncertain. This is a new thing we are developing here."

Amy smiled, "Sometimes I dream of an apartment and a job . . . but I prefer to stay here."

The Zendo was immaculate. There were about twelve students. They chanted. A drum was struck noisily. An elaborate meal ceremony was performed while two filmmakers with long hair and stained T-shirts moved up and down the aisle, photographing the mostly-young monks and nuns.

There are perhaps about two thousand (estimating very roughly) people, usually young, who practice Zen in the U.S. Zen centers—besides Zen Mountain Center, San Francisco (the biggest)—are in Los Altos, San Diego, Philadelphia, Rochester, Maine, Los Angeles, Los Gatos, California, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Honolulu, Seattle, two in New York City and Mill Valley, and Berkeley, California.

Zen is a puzzle—deliberately so. Its influence, spread by artists and intellectuals, originally taken up by the “Beat” poets of the Fifties, is greater than its numbers.

A learned very well-written book, *The Religions of Man*, by Huston Smith, contains an excellent description of Buddha's life. A short pamphlet, *The Way of Zazen*, by Roshi Rindo Fujimoto, published by the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Buddhist Association, is relatively well-written and lucid, more than can be said for *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, an anthology of the writings of Daisetz T. Suzuki (regarded as the leading scholar to introduce Zen to the West). *Zazen* informs us that, “In Japanese Zen today, there are three schools: Rinzai, Soto, and Obaku,” describing among other aspects the variations in pain. The goal is “Satori”—a sort of blinding flash of enlightenment. Zen is a mass of paradoxes—all is nothing, all is everything—peace, acceptance of the world—morality can be interpreted in every way imaginable.

“Shimano's zen is heavy,” said the girl at the California Zen Mountain Center. She was referring to The Zen Studies Society and its Zendo at 223 East 67th Street in New York City run by the Reverend Eido Tai Shimano, known as “Ty-san.”

One of Shimano's students, Peter Gamby, intrigued me. “I was making twenty-five thousand dollars a year as a trader for an investment company, buying and selling the company's shares and getting a commission on the profits. It was a complicated game, like chess, but there were a lot of things on Wall Street I didn't like. I guess I had guilt feelings. I guess if I was more advanced in Zen I could bring Zen and Wall Street together in my life, but finally I decided I'd better opt for Zen at the moment.

“I drove a cab for a year as it was the sort of romantic thing I'd always wanted to do. It surprised my friends, as does my present life. I have a girl friend whom I see one or two nights a week.” He sat in the half-Lotus position, had a small beard and a goatee and looked like a young wise-old monkey. He was a Cornell graduate.

Another of Shimano's students is a seventy-year-old lady,

an ex-dancer, who lives with her husband, presumably a tycoon, on a high floor of one of New York's newest, most expensive apartment buildings. Inside it is like another world. The air seems clean. It is completely sealed off from the outside world by steel, glass, and doormen, and there, twenty-or-so stories above the East River and the East Side Highway, you can see below what looks like the contours of another planet, with not a sound to be heard from that noisy road. Feeling like a space traveler, I watched her perform a Japanese tea ceremony—seriously and gracefully—a small woman with large breasts she seemed almost hidden by a floor-length gown as she knelt in her Oriental drawing room, her gray hair impeccably done, the makeup gentle with color. At one point she sat, presumably, in the Lotus position. She spends up to twelve hours some days chanting at the Zen Center. She said: "Doing a Japanese bow, if you are both trained in Zen, with a man you are just meeting, he bowing to you, brings you closer in spirit than if you were lying in bed kissing him."

How does one define so amorphous a group (even the word "group" is too precise) as the listeners of Michio Kushi, a lecturer on macrobiotic diets and general methods of eating the right kinds of food—spiritually and physically. Mr. Kushi, thin ascetic-looking, middle-aged Oriental, dressed in a conservative three-piece blue suit, is a follower, according to his friend Tony Abruzzo, of the late George Ohsawa who died from poisoning himself accidentally while trying to invent a healthful substitute for Coca-Cola and other soft drinks. Mr. Abruzzo said his own ideas and those of Mr. Kushi were related to "Zen Buddhism. Monks at Zen monasteries eat this way and still do."

In the lecture room in New York there were about a hundred people—mainly young and fairly-artistic types plus some middle-aged people, including housewives. Mr. Kushi is a full-time lecturer traveling across the nation. Mr. Abruzzo, a pleasant painter who lives in Brooklyn, counted up the two dollar entrance fees collected by a dark-haired young hippie-type.

Distributed at the door, was a brochure listing "The

Order of the Universe Publications," among which are *Tao Teh King* by Lao Tzu, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Book of Judgment* (The Philosophy of Oriental Medicine) by George Ohsawa, *Chinese Acupuncture* and *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited* by Samuel Butler.

Some of these same people who were attending the lecture also go to a Yoga-like "Awesting Retreat" near Lake Minnewaska in upstate New York, described in a publicity sheet as a place where "Peace, Quiet, Natural beauty is everywhere—sparkling waterfalls, cascading brooks, majestic cliffs, wind-twisted pines, and three jewel-toned lakes.