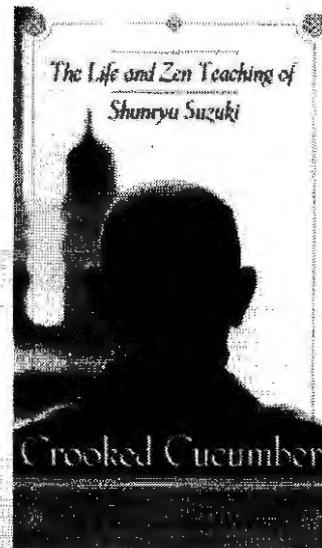


BOOK REVIEW

*Crooked Cucumber:
The Life and Zen Teachings of Shunryu Suzuki*
by David Chadwick
Broadway Books, New York, 1999



Jan Potemkin, Chogyo Int'l Zen Center of New York

How can you practice zazen? Only when you accept yourself and when you really know you exist here. You cannot escape from yourself. This is the ultimate fact, that "I am here."

Shunryu Suzuki

Shunryu Suzuki is a Japanese Soto Zen priest who arrived in the United States in 1959 and began one of the first Zen groups for American students. His sangha grew steadily during the 60s and 70s and came to include San Francisco Zen Center and a mountain monastery at Tassajara Springs. He died in 1971.

In the four hundred pages of *Crooked Cucumber*, we learn quite a bit about Shunryu Suzuki and his establishment of one of the first successful sanghas for Americans. He emerges as a human being, just as capable of forgetting to appear at a funeral as dropping a penetrating word on a student at just the right moment. David Chadwick is very careful to present a full picture of Suzuki and of life as a Zen Master. Thus, intense devotion to Buddhism and his students is balanced with occasional neglect of family responsibilities

or the feelings of an old friend. "Good priest, bad husband," his free-spirited wife wryly comments.

Chadwick therefore successfully walks a tightrope in this inspiring and wonderfully readable work. It is precisely because Suzuki has no self-importance that he is adored by his students. But if the biography was solely a fawning collection of his inspiring talks, or his hilarious comments (though there are many), or even his bad English, we would miss the point that he tried to impart to his students through his own example, stripped of any charisma. The honest inclusion of faults provides the shading necessary for a real portrait.

Suzuki's own book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, has found its way into the collections of many Zen students since its publication in 1970. His face on the back cover, gazing fixedly and directly at the reader, somewhere near a smile, has burned itself into my memory. I wondered if Chadwick would mention it. His book is so complete in its coverage of Suzuki's life that there is indeed a discussion of the photograph, including a charming account of Suzuki's wife's

complaint that he needed a shave when the picture was taken. In Japan, she laments, he would have been able to dress formally and pose. Instead, we get a bright image that captures Suzuki's ability to be present at all moments.

In fact, *Crooked Cucumber* in many ways describes the flowering of Suzuki's own practice after he arrived in America. His life as a Soto Zen priest, tending to the life of rural temples in Japan, seems lacking in inspiration for Suzuki, and his statements of devotion for his teachers sometimes seem misplaced after accounts of their harshness or distance from their students. And Suzuki's Japanese congregation in San Francisco and his traditional responsibilities of prayers and funerals gradually vanish as a host of energetic students, often counter-culture 60s dropouts, eagerly flock to Suzuki. Despite the desire of many of Suzuki's students to go to Japan to get the "real" taste of Zen, Chadwick portrays a lively and healthy form of Zen in America. The accounts of Beatniks, then Hippies, cutting their hair and adapting to Zen practice should ring quite true to readers who are involved with Zen centers.

One obvious omission is the story of Zen Center (plainly named by Suzuki) after his death, perhaps because of some controversial events. The book ends with a heart-wrenching section on Suzuki's courageous last months and the reactions of his students, and the installation of Richard Baker Roshi as his heir. How this worked out, and how Zen Center fared without him, is something the reader must learn elsewhere.

Also, Suzuki's own teaching style and language is contained in short quotations from talks or casual conversation. These are italicized and appear before each section of the book, one every couple of pages. Ultimately, we read many examples of his teaching, loosely connected to the subject matter of the segment. A whole talk would have been welcome, especially in light of the scarcity of other material available about Suzuki. Even after four hundred pages, I wanted more.

Readers who feel the same way can try Chadwick's 1994 book, *Thank You and OK! An American Zen Failure in Japan*, an account of his own practice in Japan which also discusses the teaching of Suzuki and his heirs.

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