

"Gangbuster" Zen hits Sebastopol

Local author traces the teaching and life of
Soto Zen Buddhist Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

by Petra Sperling-Nordqvist,
Sonoma West Staff Writer

Sebastopol resident David Chadwick was ordained as a Zen priest by the late Zen master Shunryu Suzuki in 1971, at the age of 26, just months before his master's death.

Chadwick once asked his teacher Suzuki about the meaning of his lectures on Zen Buddhism: "Could you just please put it in a nutshell?" Suzuki answered: "Everything changes."

In February 1999, Chadwick's

second book was published, "Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki."

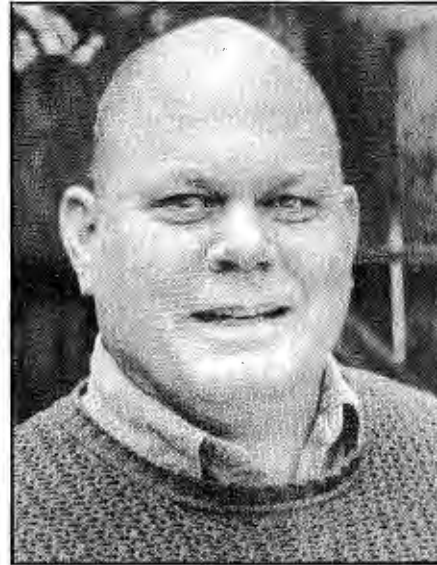
The author gave a reading at Copperfield's Books, Sebastopol, on Tuesday, February 16, and has been traveling to speak at bookstores, universities and Zen centers nationwide.

Robert Pirsig, author of "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle

Maintenance," anticipates that the biography's "precise picture of Suzuki's values, hopes, and problems could make it a major primer of Zen itself."

Chadwick is a full-time writer who

started his career as a penman in 3rd grade, composing poetry, lyrics



DAVID CHADWICK

and music for fun. Born in Texas, he has lived in Sebastopol with his wife Elin and their nine-year-old son Clay for three years.

When Chadwick arrived in Marin in

1966, he became part of the West Coast hippie scene; as he was seeking to learn how to meditate, he stumbled on the San Francisco Zen Center and started to study with its founder, Shunryu Suzuki, at the age of 21.

After 10 years of studying with Suzuki and his heir, Zen master Richard Baker, Chadwick and Elin embarked on a four-year sojourn in Japan in 1988 to learn more about Zen as well as Japanese culture and language, teach English, get married so they could live as a couple, and become parents.

Back in the United States, he documented his Japan experience in his humorous autobiography, "Thank You And OK! An American Zen Failure in Japan," published in 1994.

On his arrival in Japan, Chadwick joined his friend and Zen master Dainin Katagiri, "the

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emptiness teacher," at a small mountain temple near Kikuoka, where he would form a deep friendship with the head monk, Kiji Roshi—Roshi being the suffixed master title.

Chadwick's autobiography is also somewhat of a traveler's tale, with anecdotes about land and lore, and life at the temple, strewn with refreshingly corrosive comments on Zen discipline:

"Looking down into the valley I reflected on freedom in nature and remembered the nature of monasteries is to restrict one's physical freedom—in order to assist in the pursuit of mental freedom, true liberation, I told myself unconvincingly... I started thinking about the month-plus of slavery to temple life that lay ahead and was afraid I couldn't do it, and didn't want to

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do it, and I thought about running away. I felt like I had committed myself to a mental institution, or found myself in jail."

Descriptions of social manners and conventions are mixed with a detailed depiction of everyday temple routine: "The dramatic part of the morning temple cleaning is when the monks charge over the woodwork and floors with wet rags, moving fast to try to cover every surface before it's time for tea."

Despite the suppressive and humiliating aspects of the

traditional Soto Zen school of Buddhist temple training—"Gangbuster" Zen according to Chadwick, the author concludes:

"I guess it may appear out of balance to sit and follow one's breath all day—not exactly a natural daily life sort of practice. But if there's one thing I felt, it was balanced, which shows how out of kilter my daily life gets... If

I hadn't done it I'd never have known I could. We all could. We sat unmoving in silence without going to bed for a week."

Just before returning to the U.S., Chadwick had his last private "sanzen" study and breathing meeting with Watanabe Roshi, the head monk at the principle Soto Zen temple in Japan, who advised him:

"Your way is not only in the temples and zendo [the "zazen" sitting meditation hall] but in your own everyday life... You can

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sit..., walk and stand in the One Drop Zendo—and that of course is you. It will be wherever you are.”

“Thank You and OK” is currently out of print, but,

Not true
interspersed with previously unpublished quotes, Chadwick's recent book “Crooked Cucumber” offers the first biography of a Zen master in the West, Shunryu Suzuki, whose first teacher nicknamed him Crooked Cucumber for his forgetfulness, since Japanese cucumbers were a useless vegetable.

Yet, becoming one of the most influential teachers of Zen Buddhism in the U.S., Suzuki Roshi founded both the San Francisco Zen Center and the first Zen Buddhist Monastery in the West, Tassajara, near Big Sur, ordained a first generation of Buddhist teachers East of the Pacific, and wrote the modern Buddhist classic “Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,” published in 1970.

Chadwick's rendering of Suzuki's life illustrates what it means to dedicate one's life to the practice of Zen. He follows his master's life from childhood through his harsh Soto Zen training, the Second World War and his work as a priest in Japan to his achievement establishing Zen in the U.S. during the 12 last years of his life.

Born in in Kanagawa in 1904, Shunryu Suzuki followed his older brother and first Zen master, Gyokujun So-on Suzuki, to the temple Zoun-in in Moro, and later to Mori Rinsō-in in Yaizu, at the age of 11. So-on Suzuki Roshi was the abbot of the temple, and also skilled at the art of archery, kyudo.

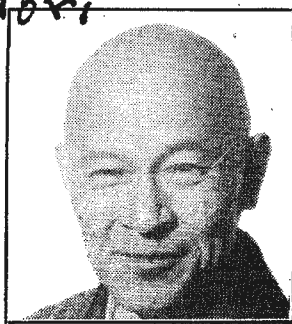
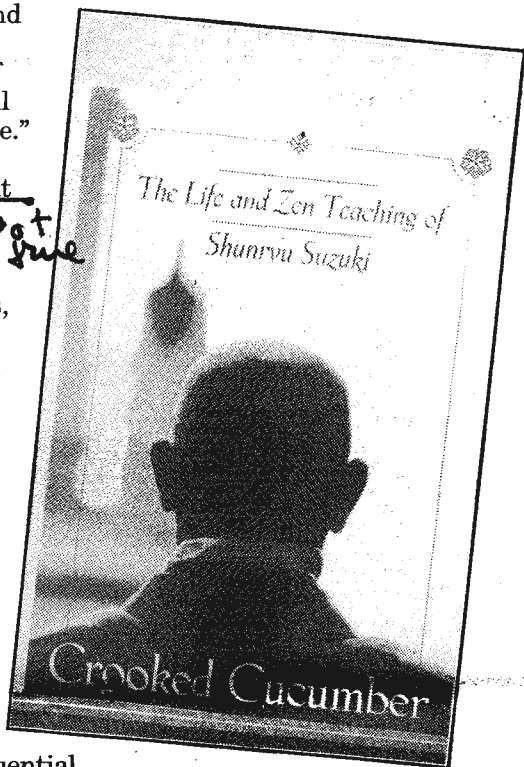
At the age of 22, Shunryu was ordained head monk under the guidance of his second master, Dojun Kato, at Kenko-in in Shizuoka City. Meanwhile, he was an ambitious, excellent student in Tokyo, graduating from Komazawa University in Buddhist and Zen philosophy in 1930, at the age of 25.

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi succeeded his brother at Rinsō-in in 1936, but it took a while before he was allowed to have his wife and two young children live at the temple with him.

With the aim of rebuilding his country through Buddhism and general education, Suzuki established and ran a study group for young people and two kindergartens after WW II. In 1952, his wife Chie was murdered, leaving four children behind.

When Suzuki Roshi first arrived in San Francisco in 1959, leaving his third wife Mitsu and four children behind in Japan, he was 55 years old and fulfilling his dream of teaching Zen to the “beginner's mind” unimprinted by over 2,000 years of cultural ritual and rigidity.

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Shunryu Suzuki Roshi died of cancer in December 1971.



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