

An Irreverent Zen Priest's Take on Japan

THANK YOU AND OKI

An American Zen Failure
in Japan

By David Chadwick

Penguin/Arkana; 464 pages; \$13.95,
paperback

BY ALIX MADRIGAL

Round, casual and very Western, the ebullient David Chadwick doesn't look much like a Zen Buddhist priest.

These days, settled in San Rafael with his wife, Elin, and their young son, Chadwick doesn't get to spend much time at the San Francisco Zen Center, where he was ordained in 1971. "They have a phrase in Japan, 'paper driver,'" the San Rafael author of "Thank You and OKI" said recently. "That's somebody who has a driver's license but doesn't drive. That's the kind of priest I am — although I am doing a wedding in September."

Born in Texas, Chadwick wandered to New Orleans, Mexico, Mississippi (where he worked with Students for a Democratic Society) and, finally, San Francis-

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co. Psychedelics convinced him of his religious path, and the phone book led him, "an unkempt semhippie with curly long hair all frizzled out," to the San Francisco Zen Center in 1960.

Twenty-odd years later, Chadwick found himself at loose ends. Elin, then his girlfriend, was in Atlanta, writing her thesis and thinking over their relationship, his son from a previous marriage was in Spokane with his mother, and Chadwick was getting tired of running the Zen Center's kitchen. On New Year's Day 1988, he set out to buy a new calendar for his wall. "I returned to my room with a plane ticket to Ja-

pan," he writes.

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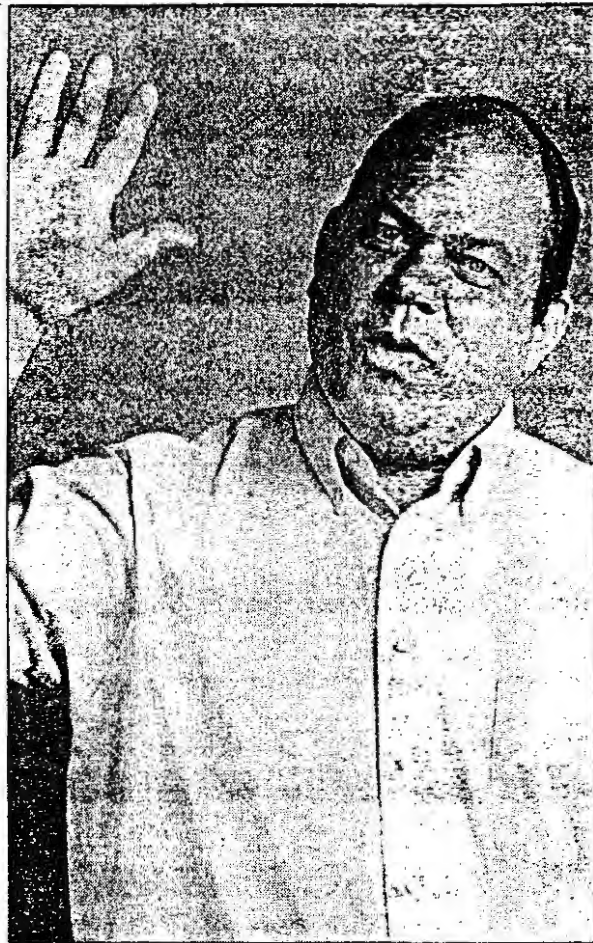
"The key to living in Japan," Chadwick says, "is not to try to be Japanese. They accepted me as a foreigner — although I'm a little pushy and outgoing to be totally accepted."

Knowing the language helped, as did Chadwick's infectious optimism. "Those *gaijin* (foreigners) who prosper and enjoy themselves, as opposed to those who just get by... have faith in Japan. I had faith," he writes. But then, he says, he tends to enjoy himself most of the time. "I go into things like you go to Disneyland, thinking, Wow, this is great, what are we going to do first?"

Chadwick's first stop was a small, isolated monastery, where he came for what a friend called "a tuneup." Chadwick's friend and teacher Katagiri Roshi was in residence, and Japanese and American priests lived together there in somewhat frayed harmony — the Japanese clinging to a "paternalistic hierarchical anachronism," the Americans a "wild bunch of... Zen loonies."

After the monastery, Chadwick headed out to the unknown to explore, visit friends, find a teacher. "Where will you live? What will you do?" a Japanese priest asks, horrified. "The universe will provide," Chadwick answers airily, adopting the Japanese saying, "Tomorrow's wind blows tomorrow," meaning "tomorrow will take care of itself."

Chapters on the monastery alternate with those on Chadwick's life with Elin, who eventually joined him in Japan. Living outside the gates of the temple where Chadwick meditated and studied, they settled down to teach English and learn the ropes. The forms and formalities were often baffling, but unfailingly someone was there to help. (To get a Japanese driver's license, Chadwick underwent a lengthy test that included such questions as "When was your last written driver's license test?";



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"What was the rank of the officer who administered this test?"; "And what language was the test administered in, Japanese or English?" As officials gently coached him on the correct answers, Chadwick was transported to a state of bliss over the Japanese-ness of the experience.)

Japan, Chadwick finds, is "a land of generosity" in which garbage collectors wear white gloves and umbrellas are passed out like water. Once, he writes, "an old lady ran out of a coffee shop and gave me an umbrella. I tried to tell her I was okay, but she insisted. I'd been in Japan a year and I couldn't count the umbrellas I'd been given."

Businessmen stay in hotels whose rooms are capsules, curtained rectangular beige plastic containers containing a futon, a television and a shelf for possessions. Most Japanese blame the emperor and the right-wing fanatics for World War II. ("The Americans only pulled the triggers," one woman tells him). And he was delighted to hear the midwife who helped Elin deliver advise the couple to make love as much as possible during the preg-

nancy. But for all Chadwick's ebullient enthusiasm, the book is tinged with a note of sadness. Katagiri died back in the States, believing himself a failure who never "realized his dream of sinking his dharma [Buddhist teaching] roots deep in America." And Chadwick's youthful idealism and fervent belief have dimmed, he revealed in a recent interview. "We had a very naive idea in the '60s of what Zen was and what was possible," he says. "We believed that perfectibility was right at hand. Since then, not only students but the masters have tripped on banana peels."

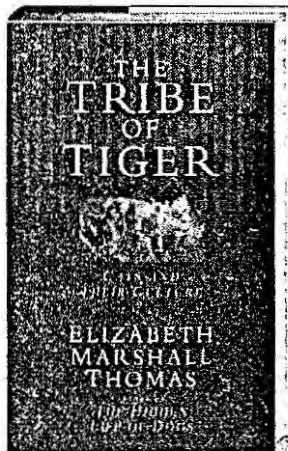
"All these ideas of perfection, they tend to make us feel unhappy and unfulfilled. It is in the midst of our imperfect lives that we find the most wonderful things."

Thus the subtitle, "An American Zen Failure in Japan." "The title struck me as very funny," he says. "It's like a koan. And several people have asked me, 'How do you know you're a failure?'" ■

Alix Madrigal is on the staff of *The Chronicle*.

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