

ZEN RETREAT IN CALIFORNIA: NOT FOR THE FRIVOLOUS

By J. R. Goddard, *Village Voice*, Thursday, July 6, 1967.

TASSAJARA, CALIFORNIA—In the heat of late afternoon, in a creek bed below the stone buildings of Tassajara Hot Springs, men work with the cold mountain water swirling around their legs. Prying at boulders to rechannel the creek, rebuilding almost stone by stone the old walls, buttressing its steep banks, they are stopping erosion that for years has undermined a nearby bridge.

One is an elderly Japanese in plain white robes, his head smooth shaven. Around him are Americans in blue jeans or worn Army fatigues, a few with heads as smooth as his. He points to some snagged opening in the wall. "Maybe to put two rocks please—small and flat." They do it without question, in respect to him not only as a priest but as a craftsman. He has often done stone work in his monastery in Japan.

Elsewhere more men are putting a new roof on the property's main building. Or cutting firebreaks at the bottom of steep, brushy hills that enclose Tassajara into its narrow canyon. Over in the kitchen, the women of the group are helping ready dinner.

But all this activity does not cease with dinnertime. It only distills itself. At eight in the evening the group will assemble as they did at six that morning for their second hour of silent meditation—meditation so strict in its cross-legged, straight-backed rigidity it is really hard work of another kind.

These are students of Zen Buddhism. Most are young—early 20's to mid 30's—though a few are older. Some are professional people, or college students. Others include a carpenter. Or an ex-GI who until recently dispatched scenery trucks at a major Hollywood studio. Still others have come in off the trails of hippydom.

Their Zen master is Shunryu Suzuki. Under his direction they've been reshaping a battered California mountain resort into a national Zen center, which officially opens for meditative traffic in July.

The mountain center is the result of a steadily growing Zen interest in America over the past fifteen years or so. More specifically, it is the outgrowth of what has gone on in that city which nurtures so many new phases of our cultural life, San Francisco.

Ten years ago Shunryu Suzuki—or Suzuki Roshi, "Roshi" meaning Zen Master—came to San Francisco to lead a congregation of Japanese-Americans. Soon he found many non-Orientals coming to learn about Zen. This led to the opening of Zen Center, which promptly became so active an assistant had to be brought from Japan to help out.

Yet city distractions made it difficult for students to concentrate for long periods on Zen training. A quiet retreat was needed, not only for San Franciscans but any other Americans wanting to learn meditation. Richard Baker, a young Oriental Studies scholar who organizes national conferences for the University of California while also serving as President of the Zen Center, heard of the ideal place. An undeveloped section of the Tassajara Hot Springs resort deep in the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains of coastal Monterey County was for sale.

Hundreds of Zen followers contributed money. Allen Ginsberg and Zen popularizer Alan Watts aided other fund drives. Rock 'n' roll "Zenefits" drew more cash, as did sales of painting and sculpture. Then as the substantial down payment sum was reached, it was learned that actual buildings and mineral baths at Tassajara could be had. The Zenists took possession this spring.

Advance Guard

During the months since, the advance guard working and studying at Tassajara has slowly swelled to well over 30. Come to know some of them and you'll probably get a fair idea of the kinds of people drawn to Zen anywhere in America. You'll also find out more exactly what sitting in meditation, or "zazen," really is.

Peter Schneider, Tassajara's general manager, is one of the most articulate of the pioneering group. An affable, good-looking man in his late 20's, he has several years of graduate school behind him as well as desultory teaching of English and math. Throughout local Zendom though he is known as the man who sat zazen alone for two years—something of a solo flight record, considering one usually sits with others, or with priestly guidance.

"When you begin to sit, your mind suspends for a while," he explains. "Then things that have been pressing in on you start coming up. Something you've been worrying about, or even a rock 'n' roll song banging inside your head. You realize how tightly wound-up you are. And how out of contact with yourself." Gradually all this stuff empties out," he continues. "You become aware of your breathing, then of your whole body. More gradually, you come into a kind of clarity of mind—like walking down a corridor of mirrors. Everything is beautifully reflected. At that stage, whatever transpires during your day is somehow more understandable. More ready to be dealt with."

Many others at Tassajara come from the same educated, professional class as Schneider. Mike, for instance, is a bearded philosophy professor on leave from both his university and his Greenwich Village life. A Jungian analyst from Florida is stopping off briefly to deepen his knowledge of Zen. And a former missionary who's brought his wife and children along to Tassajara will teach meditation to Mexican farm workers when he returns to Texas.

Farmer Dan

Then along comes a young man named Dan. He offers quite a contrast to the others. Both he and his attractive wife dress in such rural roughness—he in faded overalls, she in long, plain dresses—they seem to be walking right off the remotest of west Kansas farms. Both have a farmland kind of taciturnity too. Yet Dan wears the flowing, near shoulder-length hair that would never blossom atop any Kansas farmer. He's also spent two years in a Japanese monastery, and has gone farther with meditation than many of his fellow Tassajarans.

"Loss of ego is the initial important thing in meditation," he says thoughtfully. "You lose your sense of self, find your mind and body coming closer together. Things around you grow in importance. Even a tree gives you a new sense of its being, its own history. From there on you find everything assuming its place in the order of things—including yourself, your own place. It's an in-

tuitive process that can eventually reach out into the whole universe.”

Which of course is what many an acid head today tries to achieve on rocket-ship trips into space, though in far shorter time.

Like the young lad from Los Angeles. “I dropped out of high school right before finishing,” he recounts. “Started using acid regularly and then dealing it. All at once the whole scene got too much for me. I got scared. Took off up the coast, sleeping under bridges, eating off other peoples’ plates to keep from starving. Man, when I made San Francisco I was in bad shape.” The Zen Center took him in. Once he began meditation training he left acid behind.

“Many people coming to Zen nowadays have used or use acid,” Peter Schneider says. “Once they become really involved in Zen though—say by the time they’re ready to come down here—they’ve stopped. Acid can’t help you reach truth the way meditation can. Meditation takes you far beyond, if you’re willing to accept the discipline.”

Tough Regime

At Tassajara, that discipline is concentrated in the meditation room, or “zendo.” Occupying the lower level of a dormitory, its immaculate hardwood flooring, its simple shrine and plain sitting mats, give it a very spare feeling. Twice a day about thirty people sit cross-legged on black pillows facing the the bare walls for at least an hour. And there’s no back-sliding either. If Suzuki Roshi sees students slump into the bad posture that hinders meditation, he quickly corrects them by pressing at shoulders and back. Students can also request more drastic measures. The Zen master will pad up behind, give them a warning touch—then *Whacko!*, hit them loudly on each shoulder with a stick.

This strict observation of form in the zendo is not limited to meditation hours, either. All three meals—much brown rice, cereal, and bread, masses of vegetables and salads—are also taken there. That same relentless sitting position prevails. And the only time silence is broken is when prayers or sutras are chanted in Japanese . . .

With July and official opening almost upon them, the pressure is really on these hard working people to get as much done as possible. The first of Tassajara’s projected two-month training sessions will open then, swelling the population to sixty or seventy. (All places for this session have been filled.)

Yet what is accomplished both in spiritual and material ways this summer will only be a bare start. Already applications for training or residencies are coming in from all over America, as well as England and Japan. To meet these needs,



*Student Sandy Watkins
working with Chino Sensei.*



programs of training and lectures will have to be expanded. And to house them a new zendo will be erected along the magnificent creek traversing the place. Moreover, the building sheltering the extensive mineral baths (they will be open to the public this fall) must be repaired.

Back up in the cold-facts world of San Francisco, \$225,000 must be raised by 1972 to complete the full \$300,000 payment on the property. Future plans also call for acquiring all the remaining private land around the springs (it is a 500 acre island completely surrounded by national forest), which will require another dollar or two.

But the start this spring has been auspicious. And as one middle-aged man who has been sitting zazen for years further commented, "Tassajara has all the right vibrations. Zen belongs here."

Student Dan Welch doing zazen in the zendo. He is referred to as "Farmer Dan" in the news story.

THE BERKELEY BARB

Another of the better researched stories was in the *Berkeley Barb*, one of the best of the national underground newspapers, dated September 29. This story gives a feeling for several of the aspects of Zen Mountain Center and for what it was like later in the summer.

THE WAY OF THE GATELESS GATE

By Ernie Barry, *Berkeley Barb*, September 29 – October 5, 1967.

To get the story on the now legendary new Zen retreat in the mountains south of the Carmel Valley, I hitchhiked up there last week. Zen Mountain Center is a monastery located at the old Tassajara Hot Springs resort in Los Padres National Forest. Getting there is in some ways as difficult as reaching satori.

The steep winding road up to Tassajara is one of the most breathtaking rides in this country. The huge mountains dramatically dwarf man. They serve as an ideal preparation for the deep mountain isolation of the hidden valley site of Tassajara. This writer was scared out of his wits by every minute of it on the way down in bright sunshine. At certain points you can see 3,000 feet straight down just from the edge of the dirt road.

Beautiful valleys and canyons stretch for vistas of ten, twenty miles. One's eyes embrace a good part of the last untouched land in Central California . . .

Moon Valley

I rode up at night and discovered what a valley of the moon really was. There was a full moon that night and up in the mountains it looked amazingly clear and full. It lit up long, deep valleys, miles long.

Originally, San Francisco's Zen Center had planned to purchase a parcel of horse pasture just above the Tassajara resort. Both are little parcels of private land in the middle of the wilderness of the huge Los Padres National Forest near the coast below the Carmel Valley area. The horse pasture was flat, undeveloped land, and it would be a matter of years, it appeared, before a full-fledged monastery could be physically assembled. At the beginning of this year the resort itself suddenly became available for \$300,000. Zen Center snapped it up with a Zen unconcern for the immense difficulties it will have raising huge installment payments twice a year until 1972.

Almost immediately the Center had a complete physical plant for a mountain monastery which would "help to put down real roots for Zen in America."

The people at Zen Mountain feel, "It will never be urbanized or within the sound of traffic." The only access to the land now is that sixteen mile dirt road which is cleared by the county once a year.

Number One Phone

Zen Mountain's phone number is Tassajara Hot Springs Number One. There isn't any number two or three. There isn't another phone for literally miles. The site is so remote that Pacific Telephone Company years ago refused to run lines up the mountains for just one number. A compromise was reached. Tassajara Hot Springs Resort set up its own phone company and paid for the lines and their maintenance, and Pacific Telephone hooked them into their system.

... Life at Zen Mountain is quite rigorous for all but hot springs guests and people who come for non-Zen meditation. Both of the latter pay resort rates and are housed in small cottages and served four course meals of tasteful and healthful American-type food, in an airy straight dining room.

The others, Zen teachers and students, also live in small cottages, two to a room, or singly in very small dormitory rooms. Their meals are eaten in the zendo (a monastery room for meditation) and are blandly simple, though probably more varied than in Japanese monasteries.

Gruel

Breakfast usually consists of gruel and fruit, lunch of soup, salad, and bread. Supper is a simple salad and a bowl of rice and a cooked vegetable. The meals are eaten in a highly formalized way with everybody squatting on cushions in the zendo. It is pretty weird as one eats between the solemn chanting of sutras (Buddhist sermons) such as this one:

"First, seventy-two labors brought us this rice; we should know how it comes to us.

Second, as we receive this offering, we should consider whether our virtue and practice deserve it.

Third, as we desire the natural order of mind, to be free from clinging we must be free from greed.
Fourth, to support our life, we take this food.
Fifth, to attain our Way we take this food."

Hot Bath

. . . The hot baths at Tassajara are real natural hot baths. The water flows up bubbling hot from underground mountain springs. It has a high sulphur content with a sharp odor.

When I went in, the water was 109 degrees F., cool to David Chadwick, a friendly, talkative hip Texan who has been studying Zen for a year. His Zen self-discipline seemed responsible for his quick entry into the water and subsequent underwater swimming in it.

. . . The San Francisco Zen Center purchased the cluster of resort buildings at Tassajara and began operation of the Zen Mountain monastery in them while at the same time continuing to operate the resort. While I was there they were handling six other guests: one was a quiet, heavily black bearded husky man who looked anything but the Los Angeles liquor store owner he supposedly was; a soft-spoken sensitive veteran of the Jack Kerouac days who had hiked in via the twenty-five miles of mountain trails from Big Sur on the Pacific; and two elderly retired couples who had come for the hot springs and were friendly but seemed to this reporter unaware of the existence of the monastery in their midst . . .

Zen Rites

Dick Baker, who has been studying Zen for seven years, was raised to monk/teacher status in a formal Zen ceremony while I was there. For the occasion Zen

Deep in this valley you can see the buildings of Zenshinji.



leaders came down from San Francisco and up from Los Angeles. The local Monterey daily newspaper, the *Monterey Herald*, even sent a reporter up the sixteen mile twisting mountain road to cover the story.

The solemn Zen rites included Dick's answering of koans, traditional Zen riddles for opening and redeeming the mind. He answered this one posed by Peter Schneider, a student, who jumped to his feet and said:

"Does the man have the finger, or does the finger have the man?"

"Buddha nature has the man."

"What is Buddha nature?"

"You can't lift it with ten men."

LSD

. . . When I interviewed Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, the spiritual leader of San Francisco's Zen Center last week I questioned him for about five minutes on LSD but came away completely bewildered by his Zen answers to me. The only thing clear was Suzuki's regarding LSD as completely irrelevant to anything.

It was even more irrelevant to young monk Kobun Chino. He had never heard of it and didn't seem to be aware that drug taking was commonplace among young Americans.

. . . I asked him what he thought of America's first actual Zen monastery. "This place is perhaps called Zen Village," he responded. "I sometimes call it Zen Children Village . . . It is a very rare type of monastery. It is a Baby Village and also a Children's Village, and it needs unimpeded growth like most things young."

"Ours is one of the only successfully functioning utopian-type communities in the United States," David Chadwick says of Tassajara. "Suzuki Roshi's spiritual presence provides inner harmony to keep the community operating."

The community will function all year around now. During July and August they had eighty students but they are now averaging between twenty-five and fifty.

With Suzuki

I interviewed him in his cabin at Tassajara. He is a short, gentle man with an air of tremendous serenity about him. . . Suzuki seems strangely un-Japanese and a bit American in his support for a basically unregulated approach to Zen enlightenment. He says he is not at all concerned about hair length but prefers shaved heads. "The shaved head is the ultimate in hair styles."

. . . He summed up Zen's response to the increasing violence and conflict on the planet thus: "Zen seeks accommodation between, not conflict. We struggle for accommodation."

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THE MERCURY

The following story was in the *San Jose Mercury*, Friday, August 25, 1967. It gives a picture of Tassajara during the training period and how a metropolitan newspaper for the general public reacts to Zen Mountain Center.

OLD RESORT NOW A ZEN CENTER

By Mac Bowe, *The San Jose Mercury*, Friday Morning, August 25, 1967.

TASSAJARA HOT SPRINGS—The occasional clink of dishware was the only sound from the more than seventy people as they ate silently under the trees at this former resort. They were students and Zen Buddhist priests undergoing rigorous training at Zenshinji—the Center for Meditation of the Heart and Mind. Meditation is one of the keystones of Zen training—walking meditation and sitting meditation. The Zen Mountain Center involves some of the most strenuous mental and physical training known to Western man. The center is comparable, in a sense, to a Christian retreat—an opportunity for students of Zen to meditate and study the philosophy.

"I don't think many who are insincere make it," Richard Baker, 31, of San Francisco, a Zen priest and director of the center, said. "We had about two hundred applications for our first two month training period. Of those we accepted eighty-five, either people we knew or those who were selected through interviews to determine their sincerity."

Then came tangaryo, a three-day session of meditation in a sitting position from four a.m. to ten p.m. with breaks for meals only. "It doesn't sound too hard, but for most people it is one of the hardest things they have ever done," Baker said. Sixty of the hand-picked students made it through tangaryo.

Life is simple in this hidden valley fifty miles southeast of Monterey. The students and priests alike breakfast on simple food such as cereal and fruit. Lunch and dinner may be soup and vegetables or brown rice. Alcohol and drugs are prohibited, although smoking at certain periods during the day is permitted. Men and women's living and bathing quarters, except for married couples, are segregated.

The day starts at four a.m. with the sound of the dawn bell, a specially cast bell presented to the center by a Zen monastery in Japan. The days are spent in sitting and walking meditation, interspersed with meals and work periods. The students are repairing and rehabilitating the facilities formerly used by the public when they travelled over the mountain roads to steam in the hot mineral baths. Less than an hour a day is spent in formal instruction, usually a lecture by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, the Zen Master.

Suzuki Roshi—the Roshi stands for master—gave up a temple of his own in Japan eight years ago to come to the United States to teach Zen . . . Roshi sees a great opportunity for Zen in the Western world. "You are not filled with age-old conceptions about Buddhism," he said. "You have no prejudices or traditions about one school or another as we have in the Orient."

Most of the students are Caucasian. Most of them will return to outside life after the two or three months of training in the mountains. A few may go on to train for the priesthood. There is an Oriental flavor about the center, but, according to Baker, there is no attempt to turn it into a transplanted Japan. . .

Many of the students shave their heads and long hair on men is forbidden in all but a few cases. Like the East Indian who appeared at the gates recently and asked to be admitted to training. . .

Rules are flexible. Baker, a vegetarian because of the Buddhist prohibitions against killing, will eat meat if it is served at a friend's home. "Rules are guides," Suzuki Roshi said. "They must give way when they conflict with reality."

The hot mineral baths have no particular place in the center's training although they are frequently used by both students and priests. "We want to keep them open to the public," Baker said. "We don't feel it would be proper to close them to people who have been using them for years in the past." Operation of the baths, however, is not expected to bring in any profits. "We'll be quite happy if we break even," he said.

The center itself is far from self-supporting. The two dollar per day charge and twenty-five dollar registration fee doesn't begin to cover costs, according to Baker. Contributions form the major financial support—from the Zen Center in San Francisco, which owns the property, from students or just from interested people

It's not an easy life, however. Communication with the outside world is kept to an absolute minimum and conversation during meditation is prohibited. Twice a week someone goes into town for groceries, and the telephone, except in emergencies, is manned only for one hour a day.

Suzuki Roshi says he tries to be harder on his Caucasian students than he was on his students in his temple in Japan. Students involved in sesshin, the final seven days of silent meditation which is broken only for meals, services and a brief work period, probably would agree.

A quiet place in the Tassajara Stream.

