

## ZEN MOUNTAIN CENTER REPORT

### SPRING 1968 PRACTICE PERIOD

Practice periods are not isolated, "special" parts of the year at Tassajara, but intensive and highly concentrated phases occurring within the general flow of everyday life. As the practice periods and guest seasons change one into the other, they are experienced as an evolving unity. Students respond to the phases of this continuum in varying ways, of course, since they arrive at Tassajara at different times and with different stores of experience.

During the first practice period last summer, the common problems the students faced were in trying to follow the daily schedule and in accepting the outward uniformity of appearance and actions—for example, shaved heads and zendo etiquette. Just getting to zazen on time can dominate a student's practice. These kinds of difficulties had diminished by the end of the practice period, however, and when the schedule was relaxed for the fall guest season, new problems became evident as the time and practice became more the students' own responsibility again.

In the following practice period that began late in February, students became more aware of the effects of accepting these external forms of practice. For example, through relinquishing suzerainty over time and space comes the recognition of the tyranny imposed by these concepts. Thus conscious of the habits that have kept him in illusionary pasts and futures, an individual's actions follow more freely, moment after moment, and his practice becomes more natural to him.

To strengthen this new awareness of a present expanded to include both past and future, everyone was given a booklet of *gathas*, or four line stanzas, in Japanese and English, to recite upon beginning and ending the ordinary but central events in their life each day: going to sleep, getting up, working, bathing, studying, and eating. These chants focus attention and help bring a deeper and more collected consciousness into the acts themselves. By becoming aware of the beginnings, ends, and interpenetrations of all events, their simultaneous births and deaths, one begins to experience each of these acts as sacred.

A student who was working at laying stone for the new kitchen was bothered by the fact that he smoked cigarettes. He reflected that the events in his daily life were like the stones, laid one beside the other, row on row. It occurred to him, with some intensity, that he used smoking like mortar, or glue, filling in spaces between events, trying to hold one to the other. Seeing this he decided to stop smoking and face the threat of these apparently empty spaces. In this way, personal, or "hidden", practice grows within communal practice.

An addition to the schedule emphasized this interrelationship of individual and group practice at Tassajara. Student discussions, lasting from one and a half to two hours, were held on the morning of every 4-day. (Calendar dates including a 4 or a 9, such as the 14th, 29th, etc., are reserved for attending to personal needs with no regular work scheduled.) During these discussions,



students were often surprised by the similarities in everyone's feelings, problems, and insights about practice. Although it seemed irritatingly natural to disagree, having differences of opinion no longer seemed as necessary or as satisfying.

Many interesting statements came out of these open discussion periods. On the differences between Christianity and Buddhism, the topic on Easter Sunday, a young student remarked: "When you go to Mass, it's not nearly so lonely as when you have to sit on a cushion for forty minutes. That takes . . . guts . . . I guess." Concerning the relationship between memory and the experience of the present, an older student commented: "When you put your finger on the present and think you finally have it—that's memory." Another student gave the following proposition about the connection between experience and knowledge: "You jump in the bath and something strikes you about where fish are at." And when a certain discussion became too analytical for one student, he asked: "Don't you understand how greedy and egocentric the words *what*, *why* and *where* are?"

Thus the nature of practice at Tassajara has changed in the past year. In the beginning students were held together mainly by the external structure of daily life. Now these "externals" seem simply the normal modes of life and the community is unified on a deeper level by the mutual respect, love, of students responsible to themselves for their practice of a single Way.





## WORK

Most of the work at Tassajara is ongoing and does not change. During the practice period it takes seven students to run the kitchen and three to staff the office; during the guest season a minimum of ten students and sometimes as many as fourteen are needed in the kitchen, six in the office and two or more to do rooms and cabins. Then the baths must always be cleaned, the garbage disposed of, the garden tended, the vehicles serviced and repaired, and the land and the 40- to 90-year old buildings generally cared for. And all supplies must be brought in 30 or 40 miles and whatever isn't totally used, eaten or burnt must eventually be brought back out.

So finding workers for the construction projects can be difficult, particularly during guest season. The work foreman must often decide which work cannot afford not to be done, and then who should do that plus his customary work. Still a goodly amount has been accomplished. The baths have been replastered where necessary and repainted, the two large bridges over the dry creek rebuilt, and the garden doubled in size and revitalized with compost made from chicken and horse manure, leaves and leaf mold, wet garbage, and other organic matter. Robes were made for the men and long skirts and blouses for the women. And the new kitchen and its sewage system are over half-completed.



*Top:  
Christopher Flynn*

*Lower left:  
Lynn Good*

*Lower right:  
Jane Westberg*







*The top soil at Tassajara is mostly gravel and decomposed granite. In the garden shown here, the students dug down two feet, then sifted out the pebbles and refilled the holes halfway with compost and organic fertilizers before putting the dirt back in.*

For the sewage system two eight-to-ten feet deep holes were dug; one eight by twenty-six feet for the septic tank, and the other twenty by fifty feet for the leaching field that the fluid from the tank drains into. Because of both our budget and our interest in doing everything we can by hand, all the digging was done without machines. The job took several students about four months to do, what with the number of stones encountered and the seemingly inevitable cave-ins. The septic tank hole was finished the week after Christmas and a 7000-gallon tank was formed in place by the carpenters and poured with concrete. The leaching field hole was refilled with four feet of fist-sized stones that the students had previously gathered from the creek one by one, pipe, another foot of stone, tar paper, and then the original stones and earth. The left-over fill was used to terrace the garden next to Suzuki Roshi's cabin.



*The leaching field hole*



In January the County Building Department finally issued a building permit for the kitchen. It required that the proposed stone walls go four feet deep and be three feet wide, tapering to seventeen inches at ground level and above. First the footings for this were dug, and then a passage excavated for the subterranean walkway from the kitchen to the cold storage rooms under the zendo. When the old hotel burnt down in 1949, Bill Lambert of Jamesburg had bulldozed the Tassajara-quarried sandstone blocks into what had been the cellar and made a parking lot. This later became the garden and the student gardeners dug them up to make room for root crops. Most of the foundation for the kitchen was built from these old stones. The nearly completed wall above ground is made from granite stones of varied weights, colors, textures and shapes which the masons gathered from the creek beds and banks west, north and east of Tassajara. Not one of the masons, including head mason Dan Welch, had laid stones previously, but they got pretty good and are invariably complimented by visitors. The masons themselves wish they were more experienced and could let the wall have more imperfections.

As the wall went up, Paul Discoe and Niels Holm, a student from Denmark, were prefabricating the roof out of timbers rough cut from Monterey Pine in Carmel Valley, Tassajara sycamore slabs, and Coulter pine logs felled on Chew's Ridge (top of the mountain road). The joints were made by traditional Danish methods (no longer used there) and by Japanese techniques Paul and Niels found in books. No nails were used. At the same time Jim Morton was building the cabinets and tables mostly by hand. This stress on craftsmanship developed naturally. The carpenters were greatly relieved to have the opportunity to do things as well as they possibly could, and in their own time. Not many workmen nowadays are asked to build something to last hundreds of years.







*After lunch in late winter*

## PARTY

It is traditional for Zen monasteries to have one party a year, a New Year's celebration, at which the monks eat and drink delicacies they haven't had since the last party. Those monks who have entered the monastery during that interval are required to prepare and serve the food and drink, and to entertain. Accordingly a party was held at Zen Mountain Center on the first day Roshi could be there after the New Year, January 8th. For drink, there was cider and beer, saki and plum wine; for food, assorted nuts, cookies, cheese and crackers, and traditional mochi (pounded rice cakes).

The students had made the one hundred and ten pounds of mochi previously during an all night work period that followed evening zazen. Bucket after bucket of steamed rice was brought from the kitchen and scooped into a mortar-shaped vessel. Two students circled the mortar with mallets and pounded the rice in time to the chanting of the other students awaiting their turns. A third student watched the rice and occasionally rushed in to turn the glutinous matter. When he could no longer see or feel any grains in it, he scooped the now homogeneous mass out of the mortar and tossing it hand to hand because of the heat, ran with it to a pastry board covered with rice flour, where others shaped it into mochi. And at the party the students ate it with traditional enthusiasm.



Everyone had to entertain, as there was no one with a year's seniority. Each student was called upon and those with "singles" performed them. The remainder of the students joined in a jug band led by the Non-Burnables, a funk quartet named that afternoon for the bass made out of a discarded garbage can once reserved for metal scraps. The other instruments were a water bucket bass and a tuba made from a toilet elbow and a fire engine primer bucket; a vocalist, Niels Holm, recited extemporaneous Danish poetry (the only line he later translated was, "There are twenty-four cows in my mother's kitchen"). After a few numbers an acoustical guitar amplified by the battery-run PA system used for Roshi's lectures in the zendo, two one-gallon cider bottles, a washboard, a mouth organ, and a couple of aluminum pot drums were added, along with primitive rock singers and dancers. Suzuki Roshi, his long butterfly sleeves aflap, accompanied the group with an improvised strobe light—a sheet of cardboard held in front of an Aladdin lamp—and towards the end Chino Sensei sang a traditional New Year's song about saki as everyone danced in a circle about him.





## GUEST SEASON

Students often heard from guests this summer that Tassajara was one of the nicest places they had ever been, though it didn't seem like a monastery to them . . . but could they sit with the students? Jim Forest, a former editor of the *Catholic Worker*, said that almost all monasteries in America had guest facilities, but that because of the enforced separation between the guests and monks, the guests often felt ill at ease, concerned that their presence might be disruptive. He felt that Zen Mountain Center was the only community he had visited in which this tension was non-existent. We hope this is true. Tassajara should be a place where anyone can come to enjoy the mountains and hot springs and then, if he wishes, observe Zen practice and get some idea of the community, and even do zazen with the students, work, or attend Suzuki Roshi's lectures.

This openness also provides the students with a good opportunity for practice. Soto Zen students in Japan return to their home temples each year after a period of training in a monastery. At Tassajara this rhythm of intense practice part of the year and more ordinary life the other part is made possible by the natural alternation between guest seasons and practice periods.

## GUEST STUDENTS

Many guests come to Tassajara who are really more like students. If they have come principally to study Zen and are staying more than ten days, they are given a reduced rate. These guest-students don't have to be totally committed students of Zen, and are not required to go into tangaryo or to follow the student schedule entirely, though they may. They are expected to do zazen with the students three times a day, attend all the lectures and classes, and work at least half a day. Their meals are taken with the guests.

## FALL 1968 PRACTICE PERIOD

The fall practice period begins October 12th and will end with a sesshin in honor of Buddha's enlightenment. The sesshin begins on December 1st, traditionally the day when Buddha vowed to sit under the Bo tree until he was enlightened. He remained there until the morning of the 8th, when he realized his true nature as he watched the morning star rise. On the afternoon of the 8th there will be a student discussion and on the following day general cleaning. Students can leave on or after the 10th.

## APPLICATIONS FOR ZEN MOUNTAIN CENTER

Generally only students who have sat at Zen Center, or with other Zen groups for an extended period, can be accepted for the fall and spring practice periods. Zen Mountain Center is primarily for regular students of Zen Center who wish to deepen and develop their practice, and for some new students from other groups. Less experienced students should apply for space sometime during the summer months, from May through September. Applicants will be accepted either as students, guest-students, or guests, depending upon their experience, the length of time they want to spend at Tassajara, and what accommodations are available at that time. For more detailed information and/or rates, write Zen Center, 1800 Laguna Street, San Francisco, California.