

## PHILOSOPHY

Washington Post

## Practice Makes Perfect

## CROOKED CUCUMBER

The Life and Zen Teaching of  
Shunryu Suzuki  
By David Chadwick  
Broadway, 432 pp. \$26

Reviewed by DAVID GUY

The training of Japanese Zen monks is famously rigorous—hours of sitting meditation and physical labor, little food and less sleep—but nobody talks about what happens afterwards. A few monks continue their hard practice and study, but most find a simocure at a quiet temple where they don't have to do much other than the occasional menial service.

Such had become the life of a fiftyish Zen monk—in the '50s of this century—named Shunryu Suzuki. He had tried for much of his life to continue teaching students and to study, but found himself in 1958 heading a small Japanese temple named Rinso-in. He held services early, then spent most of the day socializing and playing go with his friends in town. He was still tender from a recent personal tragedy: A depressed monk who had been traumatized during the war had murdered Suzuki's wife.

At that point he was offered a job that seemed even more dead-end than the one he

already had, as priest of a temple in San Francisco's Japantown. The congregation was small, the temple shabby, and the living quarters quite cramped. But he had always loved the study of English and had dreamed as a youth of teaching in the United States. He decided to go.

When Suzuki arrived, American interest in Zen was on the rise, especially in San Francisco. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki—no kin to Shunryu—had written his famous essays, Alan Watts had published *The Way of Zen*, and Jack Kerouac was romanticizing his friends as Dharma Bums. People knew something of the theory of Zen but little of the practice, and they began to seek out the tiny (4'10") Zen priest in Japantown. To everyone who came he said the same thing: I sit at 5:40. You're welcome to join me.

Thus began what has become the most influential tradition of Zen in this country. The cluster of American practitioners grew until they split from the Japanese congregation and moved to a building on Page Street that had space for 50 residents, with a number of other members living in surrounding apart-

ments. They also created a rural practice center five hours away in Tassajara and sponsored satellite zenshos in Berkeley, Mill Valley and Los Altos. (Some 40 years later they help sponsor satellites around the country, including one where I practice, in Chapel Hill, N.C.)

Suzuki's genius was to turn American ignorance of Zen into a virtue. He called it *Beginner's Mind*, saying, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, written from a series of talks that he gave—sometimes to just a handful of people—in Los Altos, is still probably the best book on Zen practice in English, and has sold over a million copies.

Most Westerners when they think of Zen picture

the romantic and notorious Rinzai school, in which monks ponder impossible questions like, What is the sound of one hand clapping? and push themselves toward a deluge of sudden enlightenment. Suzuki taught in the gentler Soto school, in which practitioners "just sit" and settle into enlightenment, like a man

going out in a mist and coming back soaking wet but never knowing when it happened.

Biographer David Chadwick has done a good job of researching Suzuki's life in Japan, but wisely he devotes most of his book to the man's stay in San Francisco, which ended at his death in 1971. At times Chadwick seems too obviously to be running through anecdotes his friends told him, some of which seem pointless or mawkish, but toward the end of the book he focuses more on Suzuki's teaching, and the man and message come together.

It is an elusive teaching, as Suzuki could be an enigmatic man, mostly gentle but breaking sometimes into wild fits of temper. "Not always so" was the way he expressed the most basic Buddhist teaching, that everything is a process of change. It is by sitting still for hours at a time that Zen students learn this truth—in their bones, rather than their minds—and then, one hopes, take it into their lives. Zen is more a practice of the body than the mind, and is lived rather than believed. It was a form of spiritual practice that Americans were apparently longing for. It was this quiet modest Japanese monk who finally brought it to them. ■

David Guy's book *The Red Thread of Passion: Spirituality and the Paradox of Sex.*



PHOTO BY BOB ASKEE

## PHILOSOPHY

## Meeting of Minds

## THE MONK AND THE PHILOSOPHER

A Father and Son Discuss the  
Meaning of Life

By Jean-Francois Revel and Matthieu Ricard  
Translated from the French by John Canti  
Schocken, 310 pp. \$24

Reviewed by DAVID CHANOFF

In literature, we're told, teaches sweetly. By

known for his range—his subjects run from politics and philosophy to language and food. He's also a noted gastronome, oenophile, and general bon vivant. He is enthusiastic, skeptical, analytic and inquisitive, cognitive man at his most expansive.

Revel's son is Matthieu Ricard (Revel is the father's pen name). Ricard was a promising young PhD microbiologist working under Nobel laureate Francois Jacob when, in 1972

heavy use of metaphor as an explanatory device, and at his arguments from physics to support Buddhist phenomenology—the "paralyzing of science by metaphysics," Revel calls it. In something like a sad refrain, he adjuces Western philosophers whose theories have embodied ideas similar to the Buddhist concepts Ricard is explaining. This is in Plato, we hear, in Epictetus, in Pascal. We have exactly these resources in our own tradi-

Only in one area does Revel falter badly. Ricard, in his devotion to the Buddhist quest for spiritual realization, betrays a deep-seated disdain not only for the plain failures of Western life, its materialism, its distracting pace, its disregard for introspection and serenity, but also for the characteristic Western modes of personal fulfillment: marital and family love ("often possessive, exclusive, limited, and mixed with selfish feelings"), work that satisfies deep internal demands,