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BOOKS

WE HAVE JUST ENOUGH PROBLEMS

Shunryu Suzuki taught how to accept "things as it is."

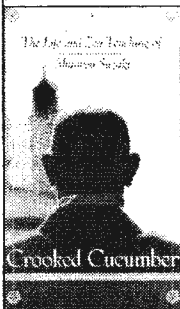
BY DENNIS JARRETT

Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teachings of Shunryu Suzuki

David Chadwick
Broadway Books

432 pages

\$26



David Chadwick begins his biography of Shunryu Suzuki — the Zen master who came to San Francisco in 1959 and pulled "Beat Zen," "Zen Zen" and "Square Zen" together — by making damn sure we understand he's authorized to write it. He presents his credentials. It's not a very Zen thing to do but he pulls it off, revealing himself as a kind of Court Clown with Portfolio.

On the first two pages we see Chadwick way back in 1968 asking Suzuki the kind of dumb question Zen lets you ask. In fact, he has the nerve to ask the all-time, best-known Zen question: what's this all about? His actual words spill over, but that's his question. The tradition crawls with more poetic versions of it than Chadwick's, and their answers, like a smack in the head with a wooden paddle. But Suzuki answers him in plain English.

"Everything changes," he says. Next question.

It's a great response, and maybe the point where a lot of weary old American Zen veterans may decide to

read the rest of the book. Next we see Chadwick rushing up the stairs of the San Francisco Zen Center in 1993 to get the blessing of Suzuki's widow, Mitsu Suzuki. He passes a statue of the master carved from a cypress stump in the Bolinas Lagoon and he says, "Hi, Roshi, Bye, Roshi," (5 points) and a minute later he's asking Mitsu if it's OK to write this book. We're not surprised to learn that it's not just OK, it's perfect. "Tell many funny stories," she says. Yes, but ..., says Chadwick, perhaps in his "poor Japanese" (3 points). Then she performs the authorization. She looks at Chadwick across the kitchen table and channels her husband. It's a long quote, but s/he says: "Please write a book about me and thank you very much . . ." Then she gives David a small toy frog. It was Suzuki's own toy frog. Finally, she wonders why anyone would object. Chadwick tells her a certain venerable priest thinks you should know "all Suzuki's samadhis" to write such a book.

"Let that be your first funny story," she says.

Why did Chadwick need so much

rank to write *Crooked Cucumber*? Because the world of American Zen, especially in San Francisco, is like backstage in the court of Henry the Eighth. Up until a few years ago, people were always getting their heads lopped off or being sent into exile. They were doing uncool American things like having affairs and seeking fame and fortune. And they did them with their heads shaved while wearing robes — loose-fitting ones — and there were secrets within secrets within enigmas. (We have just enough problems, not too many or too few.) It would have taken Bill Gates himself years to rise in the hierarchy. And he flies coach.

Chadwick does a fine job with Suzuki's life, beginning on the rainy spring day in 1904 when Suzuki was born in a rural Japanese temple. He tells "many funny stories" and reminds us of images that brought American artists, writers, thinkers, cooks and seekers to Zen in the first place. Very clean, simple things. Like Suzuki's father picking discarded vegetables out of the creek and eating them. Everything has buddha nature. Chadwick provides an introduction to Zen, a history of its major eruption in America and a bunch (like a bunch of onions) of the pungent, peeled commentaries of a modern master. It's a recipe book of the bare essentials of Suzuki's practice: Zen is the teaching of accepting "things-as-it-is" and of raising things as they go.