

Trials, tribulations of a Zen Buddhist priest

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CROOKED CUCUMBER —THE LIFE AND ZEN TEACHING OF SHUNRYU SUZUKI

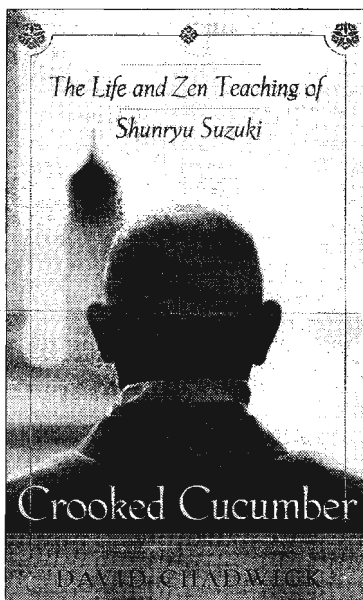
By David Chadwick
Broadway Books,
432 p.p. \$26.00

In 1987, when Susumu Tonegawa won the Nobel Prize for medicine, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher released a short statement aimed at his compatriots back in Japan: "Learn English!" he exhorted them. It was the ability to "think in English," he said, that had made all the difference to his work. This formula certainly worked for Shunryu Suzuki.

A Zen Buddhist priest at an obscure temple in Shizuoka, Suzuki went to the United States in 1959 at age 55 to take over the reins of a Soto Zen mission in San Francisco. In the succeeding years he was to build a nationally recognized Zen center, start the first Zen monastery in the West, and write the best-selling classic, "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind." During his 12 years in the United States, Suzuki made his mark in a way that he never did during decades of work in Japan.

"Suzuki-sensei has communicated with his students within a short time," said a colleague who had been filling in as part-time priest at the mission until Suzuki's arrival. "To many he is a fascinating person when he speaks English. His character communicates to them as well." In Japanese, he was largely uninspiring.

It wasn't only expatriate Japanese in San Francisco who were impressed by Suzuki, but a growing group of Americans who gathered regularly at the temple to study with the newly arrived



fearful of him hanging around the temple.

And not without reason, as it turned out. One otherwise unremarkable spring morning in 1952, the soldier-turned-monk got a hatchet, hacked the family's dog to death and, when Suzuki's wife came running to see what was wrong, brutally murdered her as well.

The incident changed Suzuki forever, with the aloof and dignified priest becoming, for the first time, a real father to his children. "Shunryu's life had been deeply changed, his heart softened, and his ears opened," Chadwick writes. "He would always harbor a deep pain, unexpressed in words."

The tragedy was a turning point in Suzuki's life. He had always wanted to go to the United States, but now the urge became all the stronger. Although he was well-liked and respected as a priest in Japan, he'd felt restricted and confined by the numbing ritual and protocol of Japanese temple life. It was in the United States, he thought, that he could bring the heart and soul of Zen alive.

Which is precisely what hap-

priest. One of them, David Chadwick, has written a superb biography of the Zen teacher.

"Crooked Cucumber," taken from a nickname given to Suzuki by one of his Buddhist teachers, chronicles Suzuki's life from his birth at the turn of the century and follows him throughout the tumultuous war years in Japan. It ends with Suzuki's death in San Francisco in 1971. Along the way, Chadwick offers an intriguing look at the evolution of Zen, and of the unique contributions made to this ancient religion by practitioners in the West.

That Suzuki was loved and revered by his American students is abundantly clear. During the long months of his final illness they would stand outside his hospital room for hours in silent vigil. And when he departed Tassajara, his Zen monastery, for the last time, they lined the road, bowing and crying and telling him to "come back soon," even though most of them knew he never would.

It is greatly to Chadwick's credit as writer and biographer that he does not stop at this—that he is both willing and able to explore Suzuki's shadow side. For while Suzuki was loved by his students, he was far from being an ideal husband and family man. Grunting and monosyllabic, he routinely barked out orders to his wife. He rarely even acknowledged his children, let alone showed them any affection.

It was fatherhood informed by a conception of himself as revered priest. He might have stayed forever frozen in this mode had he not been witness to a violent death: one largely brought about by his obsession with duty and decorum.

It was just after the war and, as a favor to a friend, Suzuki had agreed to take on an unstable man named Otsubo, a war-veteran-turned-monk who had come to stay at Suzuki's temple. From the beginning, the family was opposed, although their opposition fell on deaf ears. His wife, the essence of deference and humility, said the man "gave her the chills," and his four children refused to go near him. Many at the temple speculated that Otsubo's derangement must have been brought about by the war and, while sympathetic, were

pened—and it is a process that Chadwick documents beautifully. And yet for all this, there are important issues that Chadwick leaves naggingly unresolved. The author relays the disillusionment experienced by several of Suzuki's American students when, inspired by their teacher, they travel to Japan to study at traditional Buddhist temples. "The junior monks kept cans of meat," Chadwick reports of one person's experience. "Almost everyone smoked strong Peace cigarettes during breaks. Many monks seemed arrogant, thoughtless, and hypocritical. There were many ceremonies and duties and little emphasis on zazen (meditation). It seemed like boot camp—not spiritual practice, just a lot of physical difficulty."

These sound like reasonable enough complaints—and ones that Chadwick appears to present at face value. But Suzuki himself had been through such a "spiritual boot camp" at his temple, and had endured seemingly mindless protocol and arrogant behavior from his teacher. But somehow he blossomed out of it.

Does Chadwick approve or disapprove of the excessive ritualism and hardship of Zen Buddhist study in Japan? Does he see it as integral to Buddhist training—the "pain is your best teacher" perspective? Or does he view such rigidity critically—one that perhaps fostered the hardness in Suzuki that prevented him from listening compassionately to his family when they complained about Otsubo? These questions are at the heart of the book, but they're ones that Chadwick never fully addresses, at least not in the focused way you'd like. They get swallowed up in the narrative, lost in the colorful episodes of Suzuki's life.

Despite these drawbacks, Chadwick's biography conveys the richness of Suzuki's character, the greatness of his teaching, and how he helped influence the direction of Zen Buddhism in the 20th century. "Even before this century, all kinds of priests in the Zen tradition came to America," notes a Japanese Buddhist priest at the end of the book. "We don't really know why, but until (Suzuki) came, no one started anything that lasted. After him, so much happened. That's what I most appreciate."