

Growing straight

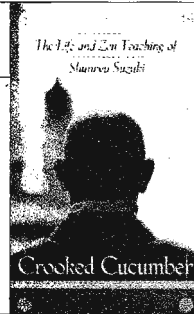
Crooked Cucumber

The Life and Zen Teachings of

Shunryu Suzuki

David Chadwick

Thorsons 1999, £10.99 p/b



'Crooked Cucumber' tells the remarkable tale of how a simple country priest from Japan, steeped in Soto Zen tradition, became Suzuki-roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, a Sixties cultural icon, and the representative of Zen tradition to a generation of westerners. David Chadwick, a long-time student of Suzuki-roshi, tells the story in a straightforward narrative style. This imparts the flavour of an insider's view, creating a sense of immediacy.

The conditions of Suzuki's life in Japan might have been the same 200 years before he was born. His father was a Zen priest and his early years were spent in the close-knit world of Soto Zen temples. Though the Meiji Restoration had discredited institutionalised Japanese Buddhism to some extent, life within the Soto Zen structure retained its traditional formalised mode.

Suzuki-roshi's formative years were marked by discipline. This expressed itself forcibly in his relationship with his teacher, Gyokujun So-on. So-on gave him the nickname 'Crooked Cucumber', suggesting the teacher did not see much potential in this forgetful and less-than-promising student. So-on was an unrelenting teacher, who used a good deal of humiliation as part of his training technique. But Suzuki accepted him fully, even though his parents wanted to bring him home after hearing of his teacher's difficult ways.

Suzuki went on to study at the pre-eminent Soto Zen temples, including Dogen's own Eihei-ji. Though not recognised as having any special qualities, he established himself in the life and routine of the 'great root monasteries'. From there he was assigned his own small country temple. He went on to marry and establish a family, which, though an increasingly common practice, was still controversial in Soto Zen. The picture of this phase of his life is of a very ordinary country cleric, beholden to his congregation.

His wife, herself the child of a priest, was

well suited to this life and she managed the home and raised the children, but they were quite distant. All this changed in 1952 when a deranged monk, whom Suzuki had allowed to stay on at the temple despite his family's misgivings, murdered his wife. From this point forward, he found his life increasingly unfulfilling.

In 1956 it was suggested to Suzuki that he might consider filling a need for a Soto Zen priest among the small Japanese congregation in San Francisco. He had studied English in school and was intrigued by America. After a few weeks of reflection, he decided to accept.

No one could have foreseen the momentous consequences of this decision, which could not have seemed more unlikely at the time. Here was a Japanese country Buddhist with a reputation for mediocrity heading for a country in which there was little evidence of Buddhism beyond the communities of Asian immigrants. Within 14 years, in 1970 he had established the San Francisco Zen Center as well as Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, which were the product of a large sangha of mostly western students. How this all arose is the story of the rest of the book.

The basis of Suzuki-roshi's success is not hard to understand when one reads his Dharma talks. Somehow he was able to capture the essence of the Zen tradition in an idiosyncratic English well suited to the purpose.

Soon after his arrival in the United States, his reputation began to extend to the late beatniks and early hippies — young westerners intrigued by the new-found lore of eastern religion. Thanks to his accepting and compassionate nature, they stayed. Soon his western students far outnumbered and out-practised his Japanese disciples. The trend that led to the burgeoning of Zen in the West had begun.

Having myself been on the periphery of the events retold in the book, I found the narrative fascinating. David Chadwick does not spare the details of the difficulties faced by Suzuki-roshi

himself, as well as, by extension, his heroic third wife Mitsu. Nor does he disguise the mistakes, intrigues, jealousies and associated problems of his arrogant, naïve and bumbling western students. There is, however, a wonderful sense of warmth and devotion. Especially touching is the story of the communication between Zentatsu Richard Baker and Suzuki-roshi, when the latter was on his death bed.

The only jarring note in the book is the tendency on the author's part to describe incidents as though he had been present when he could not have been ('As the western sky turned pink ...'). Although this does enhance the book's immediacy, it also makes me suspect him of a bit too much licence. But this is a small quibble with a truly fine book. A wonderful and inspiring story wonderfully told!

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