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Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center

by Michael Downing
Counterpoint, Washington, D. C., 2001, 385 pp
reviewed by Vladimir K., February, 2009



Suzuki. Some say it was D. T. who brought Zen to America. But really, he brought it to American universities. He brought it as an academic study. He never talked about zazen. Not in all his books and essays is there a whole chapter devoted to meditation. He thought Americans would never "get" it. He didn't ordain any priests. He didn't open a Buddhist monastery. He wasn't a monk. No, it was Shunryu who brought Zen Buddhism to America. Suzuki-roshi. Sure, there were others earlier than him (for example, Sokei-An) but it was the Crooked Cucumber who really set the roots deep when he, and a group of wild and crazed Americans, decided to buy Tassajara and start the first Buddhist monastery outside of Asia. Nobody had ever done that before, not in the 2500 years of Buddhism. And along comes this little Japanese guy, with his robes and his giggles and his mystery and, in the midst of the hippie upheaval of the 1960's on the West Coast of America, he decides that

book cover

Buddhism should flourish in America and that America needed a Zen Buddhist monastery.

There's a story here alright. Tassajara. San Francisco Zen Center. Green Gulch Farm. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. A gourmet vegetarian restaurant, Greens. Tassajara Bread Bakery. The Whole Earth Bookstore. *The Tassajara Bread Book*. A multi-million dollar story. Half a million copies of *The Tassajara Bread Book* sold by 1985 with a quarter million copies of *Tassajara*

Cooking. Back in the early days, back in 1962, assets totalled \$550. In 1965, annual operating budget was just \$5,419.22. Less than 20 years later, the operating budget had blown out to some \$4 million. The Abbot's department alone spent \$215,000. But this is not a story about money. And it's not *not* a story about money.

It is, however, a story about people, a story about Zen, a story about America. In the beginning there was Suzuki-roshi, who came to America in 1959, set up his shingle, *zazen*, and three years later founded the San Francisco Zen Center, which went on to become the most influential Zen center outside of Asia. They built it and the people came. California governor Jerry Brown. Poet Gary Snyder. Trickster Ken Kesey. The creator of the Whole Earth Catalogue, Stewart Brand. The Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin played at fund-raisers. Xerox inventor Chester Carlson donated. But the real mover and shaker, the big kahuna behind it all, was Richard Baker, who became Suzuki-roshi's sole dharma heir and abbot of the whole shebang when Suzuki died in 1971.

It's a story about Richard, that's for sure. Richard with his charisma, his ambition, his boundless energy, his massive ego. Richard, the right-hand man, the man with the contacts, the man who got things done, the Zen Center's factotum. The formidable Richard. Six-foot two, bald headed, elegantly robed. When he and Suzuki-roshi first

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saw the Tassajara property, Baker asked, "Do you want it?" Suzuki-roshi said, "Can we afford it?" Baker just repeated the question, "Do you want it?" (p31) That's all there was to it. The fact that the Zen Center had a budget of just \$6,000 at that time and the asking price for the property was \$300,000, was beside the point. Do you want it? I can make it happen. And he did. When he saw a small temple about to be torn down on one of his visits to Japan, he had it taken apart, packed into a container and shipped it to America. The transmission of Zen from Asia to America. Richard got things done, whether it was raising hundreds of thousands of dollars from some of the rich and famous or organizing a poetry festival, it happened. But there were casualties along the way. Oh, so many casualties. And hurt and pain. Richard Baker-roshi set the standard for hurt and pain at a Zen center and since then many others have followed in his footsteps. But he was the first, the first big kahuna to fall.

It's easy to dismiss this story as the failure of an American Zen Master and, so, the failure of a Japanese Zen Master to give transmission to the right person (wrong choices have been made in Zen throughout history). However, it's not as easy as that. Richard's sexual philandering and (what was perceived as) financial self-aggrandizement nearly destroyed the San Francisco Zen Center. This was a center that had hundreds, if not thousands, of people investing buckets of their blood and treasure for many years to make it work and suddenly found out that things were not what they thought they were. And it hurt. It really hurt. And it tore the center apart. How do you handle this? As one member pointed out, "We spent fifteen years and thousands of dollars on psychologists and consultants trying to learn how to talk about it. We should talk about it." (p161) But it's still hard, hard to talk about, even thirty years later. Hard to face. It's like the death of someone close to you. You move on. Life happens. But then, when you think about it, when it sneaks into your consciousness, you feel a shudder in your belly, like a stone dropping, a jolt of electricity through your nervous system. You can say you're over it but you never really are. It comes up every now and then, less with the passage of time, but it'll always be there. It's all not that easy, not so clear cut. There's too much at stake here.

The basics of the San Francisco Zen Center story are well-known throughout Western Zen circles: an enigmatic Zen monk comes from Japan and sets up a center and the first Buddhist monastery in the West at Tassajara in 1967; it all becomes wildly successful; he gives transmission to just one person, Richard Baker and shortly afterwards, in 1971, Suzuki-roshi dies. Baker-roshi goes on to make the center even more well-known and successful. Then the whole enterprise hits a wall. 1983. The Apocalypse. The married Richard Baker-roshi, father of two children, is discovered having a sexual affair with the wife of friend and Zen Center supporter, Paul Hawken. And this was during the Western world's first Buddhist Peace Conference at the Zen Center's Tassajara property. Diamond Sangha founder Robert Aitken was there. Poet Gary Snyder was there. Vietnam's most famous Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh was there. Former California governor Jerry Brown was there. And most of the senior priests of the Zen Center were there. And the recriminations began. But this is not a story about sex. And it's not *not* a story about sex.

As the subtitle of the book goes, this is a story about desire, devotion and excess. It is a story of the desire and devotion of thousands of Americans who wanted Zen. It's certainly a story of excess. Of not just Richard Baker's excess (driving around in a BMW wearing antique Buddhist robes worth thousands of dollars) but also the excess of the Zen Center. While Downing's book focuses on the Baker controversy and how the Zen Center handled it, the sub-text here is Zen in the West. Westerners, especially Americans, are entrepreneurial by nature and no Zen center was more so than the San Francisco Zen Center. It not only purchased Tassajara, a former hot springs resort 150 miles south of San Francisco, but also Green Gulch farm, opened a top-class vegetarian restaurant, Greens, in San Francisco, published books, and purchased extensive property around its city center where practitioners could stay. It also ordained Zen Buddhist priests. Baker-roshi alone ordained over sixty priests during his abbotship and in one day gave lay ordination to fifty-three practitioners. (p195) By the time he left in 1983 he had over four hundred dokusan students. There was nothing small about the San Francisco Zen Center.

But all of this created great problems for the center. Financing such an extensive center meant that money was a constant problem. There is no history in the West of lay support for Buddhism. So business becomes an important part of the practice.

Zen students become business men and women and workers. Zen slaves. Greens restaurant could be profitable because the Zen students who worked there were paid a pittance. And were told it was “work practice” and wanted it to believe it was “work practice”. Washing dishes, sweeping the floor, serving as waiters, chopping vegetables, working long, long hours. So long that zazen becomes difficult. If you don't like working in a restaurant, you can become a farmer at Green Gulch. Which is pretty exciting — weeding, planting, harvesting. Outside, in the glorious California sun. Exciting for a weekend but how many urbanites want to make a life of it? But it's “work practice”. They're told it's a Zen tradition, samu. Zen monasteries always had “work practice”, strived to be self-sufficient. So Zen Center students received monthly stipends (not wages) of \$75 to \$300 (in 1979) while Tassajara, where many worked, brought in \$100,000. It is unlikely that any of Zen Center's projects could have turned a profit if they had paid proper wages for the staff. However, this is not a story about money, but it could be.

This is also a story of desire. Desire to become a Zen master, to receive transmission. Many at the Zen Center were surprised and not a little disappointed when Suzuki-roshi chose only one successor, Richard Baker. Some left. Years of practice had not given them the ultimate prize, transmission. Baker-roshi, during his abbotship at the Zen Center, gave transmission to just one person, Reb Anderson. More disappointment. The issue of transmission and Dharma heirs is a thorny one. It can create animosity, jealousy, envy, and conflict within a center. Much (but not all) of Western Zen is based on a Japanese tradition. Yet today, transmission in Japanese Soto Zen is almost meaningless. Spend a year or so at Eihei-ji, get daddy to give you transmission, have a nice ceremony and you're a Zen master. Or at least a Zen roshi. No big deal. This is what Suzuki did with his son, Hoitsu. Gave him transmission in 1966 although Hoitsu had never studied with his father. But transmission in the West is a big deal. It opens doors. It confers authority. It allows you to start your own center, to write books, to confer transmission on others. And somewhere, buried amongst the politics, the money-raising, the book signing, is the myth of enlightenment. Zen tradition says that the student should not only equal the teacher's enlightenment, but exceed it. But of course, that's just another Zen myth but the Zen Center couldn't live up to that myth.

It is unlikely that Michael Downing's book will be superseded by another telling of the San Francisco Zen Center and the Richard Baker story. Time passes, memories fade and people move on. Downing wrote this almost twenty years after the apocalyptic events it describes. This book will remain the definitive history of that era, those early years of Zen in San Francisco and the excesses of an abbot. The book is superbly written and a fascinating account of what went wrong at what was probably the most important Zen center in the West. The questions it raises about the transmission of Zen Buddhism to the West remain unresolved, as subsequent scandals at Zen centers indicate. A weakness of the book is that it gives no sense of the Zen teachings of Suzuki or Baker-roshi. Reading this, one would not know very much about the Zen being taught at the San Francisco Zen Center. However, there are a number of books available now that are collections of talks given by Shunryu Suzuki so perhaps Downing felt it unnecessary and out of the scope of his book.

While entire libraries of Zen books are written and Zen roshis sprout like spring daffodils, one has to wonder just how long it will take until we can really understand how to bring Zen Buddhism to not only our Western societies, but also our troubled modern technological era. The Richard Baker/San Francisco Zen Center story is a story of one of the fumbles along the road. There will be many more. This is an excellent book. Read it.

Further Readings:

Richard Baker and the Myth of the Zen Roshiby Stuart Lachs
Means of Authorization: Establishing Hierarchy in Ch'an /Zen
Buddhism in America by Stuart Lachs
Coming Down from the Zen Clouds:A Critique of the Current State of
American Zen by Stuart Lachs
Holding the Lotus to the Rock: reflections on the future of the Zen
sangha in the West by James Ishmael Ford

books:

David Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki*, Broadway, 2000. **buy now**
_____, *Zen Is Right Here: Teaching Stories and Anecdotes of Shunryu Suzuki*, Shambhala, 2007. **buy now**
Shunryu Suzuki, *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen* New York, HarperOne, 2003. ([book review here](#)) **buy now**
_____, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, New York: Weatherhill, 1970. **buy now**
_____, *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai*, University of California Press, 2001. **buy now**



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