

for David Chadwick @505-820-6702

CROOKED CUCUMBER: The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki by David Chadwick. New York: Broadway Books, 1999. \$26.00. 432pp.

Reviewed by Edward Brown

In college in 1964 I wrote a paper on alienation and anxiety, got a good grade, and was just as alienated and anxious as ever. "What good is this scholarly stuff?" I wondered, "I want something relevant to my life." Shortly I received a letter from my brother (who later became an Episcopal priest and subsequently a Catholic) who was then attending the Zen Center in San Francisco. Along with personal news were some Zen teaching stories including one where an excellent young student tells his mother how well he is doing in school. Her response is, "Son, I didn't raise you to be a walking dictionary. Why don't you go to the mountains and attain true realization?" Right away I thought, "That's for me."

So I dropped out of school and the following year went to the Zen Center, started meditating, and met Suzuki-roshi. I wondered if he would like me. When we bowed to one another, I didn't have a clue. His impassive expression left me at a loss. I felt completely received rather than distanced or defended against. I didn't have to hide anything in order to protect him, and I didn't have to show off in order to win his approval. I could be who I was. His presence was an incredible gift.

Crooked Cucumber, David Chadwick's book about the life and teachings of the Zen master Suzuki-roshi makes clear that countless people here in America were deeply affected by this little man from Japan --and each of us felt that our relationship with him was uniquely special. He was *our* Suzuki Roshi, so I was particularly pleased to recognize *my* Suzuki-roshi in Chadwick's book, and if his book can do that for me I am convinced that it can bring Suzuki alive for readers everywhere, and to meet Suzuki is to meet yourself, your own aware essence. Chadwick undertook the impossible task of conveying in language the spirit of Suzuki and to a remarkable degree succeeded. Largely this is because Chadwick, who is so completely Chadwick is his everyday life, is able to keep himself out of the writing while bringing Suzuki-roshi to life.

I would have been more surprised if I had not read Chadwick's first book *Thank You and OK!: An American Zen Failure in Japan* which is a warm, sweet, wonderfully poignant and funny account of his life in Japan --studying Zen, getting married, teaching English, getting a driver's license. It's a lengthy book, but it doesn't read long, and if you know David, talkative and energetic David, you know someone's done some terrific editing. So part of the story behind the story in *Crooked Cucumber* is Suzuki's impact on David, a verbose, larger-than-life Texan. This David thirty years ago was all-over-the-map, extroverted, fun-loving, engaging (whether you were welcoming engagement or not), and charming (not because he was polished, but because he was David). And now somehow *Crooked Cucumber* emerges. Where we saw youthful excess, Suzuki must have seen his virtues all along, in a form not yet revealed: devoted, sincere, humble, good-natured, caring, hard-working --a good friend, a true disciple.