ZEN

In the quiet and misty forests of Tassajara Springs near Big Sur a colony of Zen Buddhists quietly 'turns on' in the oldest way known to man—by probing their own minds in peaceful and (the writer found) sometimes painful meditation and search for awakening to universal truth. By RASA GUSTAITIS

I wake to the sound of a bell's jangling and the heavy thuds of someone running outside. Opening my eyes, I see a window square of night sky. Surely it isn't time to get up. I pull my arms out from under the covers. It's cold. Quickly I draw them back under. But the runner with his handbell passes again. At the same time I hear the sound of the *han*—a wooden hammer struck against a wooden board outside the *zendo*. It's 5 a.m. Twenty minutes from now we're to be sitting straight-backed and motionless in meditation.

This is the way each day begins in the Zen Buddhist monastery at Tassajara Springs, deep in the wilderness of the Santa Lucia Mountains. Those who come to live here, under the guidance of the Zen master, are seeking much the same thing as some people at Esalen, Big Sur Hot Springs and Morningstar Ranch. But the way here is very different. Here there is no freaking, no tripping or emotional exploding. Zen students seek to find their true nature through a strictly disciplined simple and quiet life of meditation, work and study.

The monastery is deep in a valley, miles from the nearest neighbor, enclosed by steep mountains. The slopes are so steep all around that trees and bushes look like an avalanche suspended momentarily by an invisible force. We are only eight miles from the Pacific, but there are four mountain ranges in between.

The narrow valley runs along the edge of Tassajara Creek. At the western end are hot mineral baths, at the eastern is a swimming pool. Rows of cabins, a guest dining room, the *zendo* and the kitchen hous stretch between. Like the Big Sur Hot Springs, this was a resort until it was turned into an awareness center. Indians used to come here for healing long before it was a resort. The San Francisco Zen Center bought the buildings and 160 acres in the valley in 1966 and turned the place into a monastery modeled after Japanese monasteries. Non-Zen guests are still accepted, but I'm here to sample life as a Zen student.

At the third round of the *han* I am outside, heading across the little bridge to the long low building at the end of which lamplight glows through a screen door. As I cross the little bridge on my way to the *zendo* now, I see dark shapes moving toward it. Outside its door, sandals and shoes are lined up in neat rows. People bow as they enter, facing the long room lit by kerosene lamps attached to the walls. At the *zendo's* other end is a platform on which stands an altar with an eight-inch golden Buddha statue set against a golden glowing circle on a background of a blue velvet cloth. To the right of the altar the priests and their assistants sit beside gongs, bells and drums used during the chanting of *sutras*.

A plywood partition, about four feet high, runs along the center of the room. Along either side of it, and along both walls, are low platforms covered with tatami mats. On these, at intervals of three feet, are round black pillows or *zafus*. I walk to one of these by the partition, bow to it with palms together in front of my chest, bow to the opposite wall, and settle, facing the partition, for forty minutes of *zazen*, or sitting meditation.

Most of the students, about 30 of them, are already sitting, still as statues, with eyes half-open and legs crossed. My legs won't go into half-lotus position. I can't even get my knees down to the floor as I cross my legs. With envy I glance at the straight-backed girl beside me who seems perfectly comfortable in a full lotus. But in Zen, I've been told, such things don't matter.

"Whatever you do is right. Nothing is wrong with what you do," Shunryu Suzuki, *roshi*, said in one of the lectures I read. "But some improvement is necessary . . . The point is not whether your posture is right or wrong. The point is constant effort or way-seeking mind."

The lotus position, in which the Buddha is usually pictured, is considered ideal. The stomach area is least restricted, the vertebrae are atop one another, and one has a feeling of stability. I put my hands into a *mudra*—palms up, the fingers of the left hand over the fingers of the right, thumbs touching and forming an oval. Looking slightly downward, I concentrate on my breathing. I am stiff from sleep and warm. minutes both my feet are asleep from the ankles down. A pain begins in my groin, jumps to the back, slowly seeps into the thighs.

In Zen meditation, I've been told, you allow your mind to go to the quiet alertness that precedes thought and knowledge. As you concentrate on breathing, thoughts gradually subside like ripples on a lake. When the lake is calm, you can see its bottom and observe your own image. That image, seen fully, is the face you had before you were born—the Buddha-nature which some call God immanent.

But my mind is jumpy, my impulse is to move, to run, so that the mess in my head will fall into some kind of rhythm. It's hard to be still. After a while, the grain in the plywood before me blurs and its wavy lines begin to take on shapes. I see a face with open mouth and hands above the head, contorted bodies, bodies under torture, long flowing legs—shapes created from the pain of sitting.

After an eternity has passed, I hear a rustling near the altar where the priests sit—Kobun Chino Sensei, Dick Baker and Philip Wilson. Peter Schneider, an advanced student who might become a priest, is also up there. Now Chino Sensei comes down the aisle between our ramrod backs—I see his shadow, with the staff raised before his eyes. He walks all the way around the room and then—*whack! whack!*—there's the sound of the stick hitting shoulders. *Whack, whack* again. I look from the corner of my right eye, without turning my head. A girl bows, hands together, to indicate she wants a whack. It is administered. She bows again. Chino Sensei passes on. The woman next to me bows. Shall I ask? Do I need to be snapped into alertness from distraction or drowsiness? Yes. I bow. He pulls my hair to the left, whacks me on the right shoulder; pulls it to the right, *whack*. Not painful, invigorating. The blood courses faster, my back straightens, the mind grows calmer. But the pain in the legs gets worse.

At last I hear that someone is walking to the huge drum beside the *zendo* door. He begins to beat it, six times, slowly, and the deep vibrating sound goes right into my head and through my body. Then there's a bell and again the drums—three sequences. It is over. I can disentangle my limbs.

The next part is easy. We stand in the aisles to sing the Heart *Sutra* three times and make the perfect bow, with the forehead touching the floor, nine times. During the *sutra*, which is chanted in Japanese on one single note, Philip Wilson, up front, beats a huge hollow wooden fish with a slit for its mouth with a padded mallet. Peter Schneider strikes a bell whenever a word of particular importance is chanted. *Ma-ka-han-nya-ha-ra-mit-ta-shin*

This is the regular morning ritual at Zen Mountain Center and during the five days I am there it becomes as natural as brushing my teeth. But part of what helps me through is the thought of fifteen free minutes between morning *zazen* and breakfast, time enough for a quick hot springs bath. Looking forward to that is very un-Zen—it means I don't live fully in the moment.

I run past guest quarters and the office, remove my sandals at a little bridge, and cross the creek to the baths. I slip off my clothes, sit on a step to the pool, and put my toes into the the hot water. It's hotter here than at Big Sur, and I spend quite awhile getting used to the temperature. Two girls are already bobbing in the water and talking softly.

"The thing I'm most afraid of is colds," says one.

"That and backaches," says the other.

"Colds give me a backache and *zazen* is murder then."

"I know a good yoga exercise to clear up congestion. I'll show you later." */Continued on Page 11*

Simplicity and peace are the mainstays of life at Tassajara Springs, where Zen Buddhists and guests live and meditate in bucolic surroundings like these. At left, kerosene lamps are filled. Below, a man sits in traditional lotus position during zazen. Bottom, students are served their meal of barley rice and oatmeal, while another rakes leaves.

Continued/ A third girls appears (the baths are segregated by sex here) and I move over so she can sit down on the step next to me to dip her toes. But to my amazement, she dives right in.

"You'll get used to it," one of the other girls says to me. "It's like getting into cold water fast."

I slowly lower myself into the pool. There is just barely enough time to let the wonderful warmth seep in, then we all hurry out, dress and run back to the *zendo*. The schedule at Tassajara is rigidly structured and you move to the sound of the *han*, the drum and the bell automatically. "Our way of training," Dick Baker told me, "is to limit students in time and space so that their entire day is reduced to essentials. There is no opportunity for personal time. The student doesn't have to think about anything and we try to make it so that he can't. If he starts to think he can't keep up with the schedule. This forces the student to deal with himself and his relationships with other people."

Every activity at Zen Mountain is held to be of equal importance. All is an aspect of the practice of Zen. There is no distinction between *zazen* and peeling onions. Nothing is preparation for anything else. Everything is what it is. In cultivating this attitude, the student becomes aware that there is no distinction between the mundane and the spiritual, trivial and important, slight and profound. The student also becomes aware how he and everything else is constantly changing and learns to go with the changes by accepting everything for what it is.

A lot of this becomes real to me in the ritual of the meal. We are now again in the *zendo*, this time facing the aisle, with our *oryoki*, the eating bowls before us. They are wrapped in white napkins in the prescribed manner, together with eating utensils. After singing a series of *gathas*, or verses (". . . may we be relieved from self-clinging */Continued*

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Continued/ with all sentient beings") we untie the cloths and fold the ends under, forming a placemat. We take the second napkin, which lay on top of the bowls, and spread it across our crossed knees. The rag, for wiping the bowls later, we lay beside the placemat. The chopsticks and teaspoon go in front of the bowls, a little cloth-tipped stick, the *setsu*, to be used for washing the bowls, goes on the right. The three bowls are lined up, with the biggest on our left and the smallest on the right. Then we wait.

With a roll of the enormous drum, one of the cooks appears, holding high a symbolic food offering for the Buddha. He gives it to the priest, who puts it on the altar. The cook bows and goes out again. A few moments later, two kitchen helpers enter with huge pots. Starting with the priests, they dish out a gruel of barley, rice and oatmeal. But they don't just go around slopping it into the bowls. They stop and bow, and we bow back, two at a time, with palms together before our chests. The bow is recognition of the Buddha-nature in each of us. Then they kneel, fill the bowls, stand up and again we bow to each other. The same happens with the second course, half a bowl of warm milk, and the last, half a banana.

Then Chino Sensei begins another *gatha*, about rice coming from the efforts of all sentient beings, and we reply:

First, seventy-two labors brought us this rice,

we should know how it comes to us. . . .

Now I don't know what the 72 labors are, but as I taste the first spoonful I do feel at one with all that went to create this meal and, therefore, at one with the natural order. And, concentrating on the taste, I appreciate the subtlety of flavors in this simple food. Ground sesame seeds and sea salt are passed, again with bows, for sprinkling on the gruel.

At the end of the meal, the servers bring kettles of hot water and pour some into the biggest bowls. We sing:

The water with which I wash these bowls

tastes like ambrosia. . . .

I offer it to the various spirits to satisfy them.

We wash the big bowl with the cloth-tipped stick, then pour the water into the second bowl and then into the smallest. The servers return with pails to collect the water. I don't learn until later that we are expected to pour only a little into that pail and to drink the rest as tea. When I do find out, I am shocked that we're to drink dishwater. But there I get another lesson in Zen: what to me is dishwater is also tea and an offering to the Buddha.

My first work assignment is as dishwasher. Adjoining the *zendo*, on a platform that is covered with a roof but open on the sides, a sink and some tables have been piled with pots and dishes used by guests.

A bearded fellow, John Steiner, is already elbow-deep in a caldron when I arrive. Barclay Daggett, a retired engineer, is sweeping the floor.

Barclay has toured the turn-on circuit. He has been to Esalen, to another center, called Bridge Mountain, to assorted *gurus* and *ashrams*.

"I've had three ecstatic experiences in my life," he tells me. "One was a shot of morphine, in a hospital before major surgery. The second was in a womb tank, the third was a little *salon* on the seventh day of a seven-day *sesshin* in Honolulu."

"They were all similar," he says of his three ecstasies. "They had in common that you don't care. You just don't care. Everything is perfect. There's nothing to want."

In midafternoon, John, Jim, Patty and I go down the creek for a swim in a natural pool that spring water has carved in the rock. Afterward we stretch out in the sun and John tells me how he got into Zen.

He was a graduate student in city planning at Berkeley last spring, he says, when he became ill with mononucleosis and, confined to bed, too weak to read, was forced to reflect on his life. He found that it had been extraordinarily mental for most of his then twenty-three years. He had been active in a lot of social causes at Harvard and Berkeley, had spent a year in Guatemala on a Peace Corps-type project, but everything seemed to be in the same dimension as his studies. He began to go to the Zen center in San Francisco, dropped out of graduate school—at least for a while—and, in the summer, came to Tassajara for two months. Originally, he thought that this time off would be valuable because it would make him a better city planner. But now it became important in its own right.

Later in the day, I talked to Taylor Binkley, a dropout from his last year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Taylor, like a lot of people here, came to Zen by the psychedellic drug route. He attended the summer training session, when the schedule was much more vigorous than now, allowing only six hours of sleep and half an hour of personal time every day. At the end of the month, during *zazen*, he says he experienced *satori*. "All the classic problems—greed, anger, pride—flew apart and I rose up into beautiful reds and oranges and came down green and blue."

Like John, Taylor does not know precisely where he is going now, but has no doubts about being on the right course. "Most people here have no plans because they don't know where they'll be when they'll /*Continued*

Continued/ leave," another student tells me later. But most will not stay forever at the monastery. They will take their training back with them when they return.

At *zazen* this same day—after a supper of rice, tomato and lettuce salad, burdock roots and carrots—my legs don't bother me as much. Now there is the sound of crickets together with the quiet rushing of the creek. I go to sleep, around 10 o'clock, feeling that, somehow, things are right with the world.

But the following morning dream fragments again crash around in my head and the pain in my legs is so bad that I feel sick to my stomach. What use is this sort of torture, I wonder angrily. It deadens the faculties. Surely in Japan, where people sit cross-legged all the time, they don't go through this. How can I find unity with the universe if I can't get past what's happening to my legs?

When I meet Dick Baker later in the morning, I ask him about that. "I can't get beyond the pain," I tell him.

"Why go beyond it?" he replies. "The pain only exists as long as you compare yourself with someone who has no pain."

"But some people can sit cross-legged easily, others can't. I never could."

"It took me two years to get my knees to the ground," Dick says. "You discover you're much stronger than you realize, that you have physical and psychic second winds."

So now I feel challenged. I continue to sit cross-legged. That evening, beyond a certain point, the pain gets no worse and I can actually concentrate on my breathing. "When you are completely absorbed in your breathing, there is no self," the Roshi has said. The grain of the plywood before me begins to flow and, watching my breath and hearing the sound of the brook and the crickets, I become one with the flowing wood, the sounds, and the sap of the trees rising all around in the valley and the mountains. It is only a moment. The next morning, I wake with a sense of gladness just before the bell. But at *zazen*, the struggle begins all over again and my mind will not be still.

One person who seems to know what that means is Phillip Wilson, who beats the big fish drum or rings a gong during the *sutra* singing after *zazen*. He is an advanced student and has spent about a year in Japanese monasteries.

Ten years ago, he tells me, he got a B.A. degree in medieval history from Stanford, and thought of teaching. "But I looked over the whole system, the way everything was being done, and I decided I couldn't do it that way. So I just cut myself loose and let myself wander until something happened to put me in the direction that was right."

About seven years ago, Phillip went to a lecture by Roshi and felt he was very quiet. "No one could understand his language, his images didn't follow a train of thought I was used to. At that time, I could tell how someone's mind was by the obvious — how they dressed, combed their hair, picked up an object and put it down, by a certain quality or feeling. But he had an unusual condition in his mind and when I tried to follow it, it would become invisible. So I said, all right, I accept the challenge.

"So I went to the Zen Center every day for a year, and I thought, how can he do it? I was going batty trying to get up at 5:45 every morning, while he was getting up at 5:45 and then working all day and doing meditation every evening and staying up till 10 or 11 with conferences. After one year I got so I could do my morning *zazen*, a decent amount of work during the day and my evening *zazen*, and then I'd go out and have a beer or play around but he was still working and still more committed to life.

"I was a very bad student," he continues. "Now I listen to people differently. I see that they're expressing their nature or their confusion with it, or their understanding of it, or they're trying to complete themselves. I like people I used to avoid—like greedy, grasping businessmen or politicians. They show an unusual vitality. I see how they're struggling with their life. I don't feel separate now from anyone."

Zen Buddhism has no doctrine or creed. It is a mind-body discipline, a path toward the awakening to a truth that cannot be taught, explained/*Continued on Page 16*

Continued/or conceptualized. It can best be spoken of in paradoxes and contradictions.

Zen stories tend to be illogical, irreverent and often seem nonsensical. Though they are not symbolic, they always point to something beyond themselves. They are always vivid, never abstract.

For example, some monks asked one of the ancient masters to speak to them about Buddhism. The master told them to first work in the fields. They did so and then gathered to hear him. He stood up before them and simply spread his arms.

Or, a monk asked his master, "What is the doctrine that goes beyond the Buddhas and Fathers?" The master held up his staff and answered, "I call this a staff. What would you call it?"

Zen teachers, in these stories, had no orthodox procedures. They were brusque and abrupt, replied to students' serious, thoughtful questions with laughter or slaps or by pulling their noses. The students, in turn, upon experiencing *satori*, proved they were enlightened by behavior that would be held irreverent in most religions. The masters were invariably pleased. As a result, Zen remains in touch with simple, daily reality.

The history of Zen begins in 520 A.D. when Bodhi-Dharma came to China from India. At that time, Buddhist monks were busy meditating on the transiency of all things and seeking *nirvana* by transcendence. Zen brought the message that *nirvana* is to be found in daily life—that daily life becomes a manifestation of the infinite.

In the thirteenth century, Zen reached Japan, where it was taken up by the warrior class. In the 1950s, the Beats took up Zen in the United States and popularized it somewhat in their writings. The San Francisco Zen Center began in 1958, when the poet Gary Snyder's wife and some other people began to come to the Japanese Zen Buddhist congregation. Suzuki Roshi was, and still remains, the head of that congregation. He had come to the United States in 1958 and was one of about thirty Zen masters in the world.

He had his own temple in Japan and had been offered the headship of a large monastery, but turned it down. Among the early meditators was Richard Baker, a former Harvard student working on an M.A. in Oriental studies and Japanese history at UC Berkeley.

"I read a lot of Zen," he told me, "but I never did anything with it until someone recommended I see the Zen master. I went to a lecture and couldn't disagree with anything he said. So I went back and saw that everything he did—the way he held his body, the way he moved his hands—as all of one piece.

On my fourth evening at Zen Mountain, Suzuki *roshi* returns from San Francisco. The first evening I watch him in the role of the diplomat. A couple of wealthy people, contributors to the Zen Center, are visiting. The *roshi*, Dick Baker, and some students have dinner with them in the guest dining room.

The *roshi* is a short, slight man in a black robe. He is polite, he laughs a lot and is gracious. But whenever a question becomes awkward, I notice, he suddenly fails to understand English.

The next day he works on his rock garden, carrying and placing huge stones with Phillip Wilson's help. I watch him from a distance. He works intently. In the evening he gives a lecture.

He starts off by reminding the students that Zen is Buddhism, and talks about the history of Buddhism. When it is time for questions, he gives answers that leave a lot of people as baffled as the students in the classical stories. A girl complains that she cannot concentrate during *zazen* because the weather has grown cold and she was chilled from inside her clothes.

"I understand how you feel," the *roshi* says. "A cold or sickness won't kill you. No practice will kill you. So practice despite the cold. It is a good chance to practice. Take a negative attitude to your desires and you have a better chance of realizing your true nature. I do not mean annihilate your desire. So, if it is cold, you should not wear too much."

"Do you mean we should deny ourselves satisfaction when you say take a negative attitude to desires?" someone asks.

"Negative and positive are very important," says the *roshi*. "You have to twist a rope from two strands. Positive is not always what it seems. Which is stronger, a man who beats or a man who is beaten? It is easy to beat but not so easy to be beaten."

"Is it ever all right to say yes to your desires?" a worried voice asks. "It seems to me that what's bad is to be attached. Isn't it all right to enjoy food as long as we can forget it once it's gone?"

"Yes, that is so," says the *roshi*. "There are no rules. There are rules but they are not always to be read the same way."

When the lecture is over, students cluster outside, trying to understand what the *roshi* had meant they should do about their desires. They are uneasy. Zen is not supposed to be a rejection of the world. What did he mean? It is similar to the problem of the raspberry patch and the fig tree.

When the raspberries ripened, someone put up a sign by the patch: "To be free from clinging you must be free from greed." So nobody ate any berries, they fell to the ground and rotted. Now the figs are ripe and nobody knows how to reconcile freedom from clinging with the desire for figs and acceptance of their ripeness.

I do not stay long enough to learn the answer to the fig problem or get past the first glimpse of Zen. But when I leave, I understand a little better why one girl returned to Tassajara even though her father offered her a $4,000 sports car and four years tuition for art school if she didn't. I ride into Monterey with the monstery's laundry, with Taylor Binkley, Tim Buckley and a lovely long-haired girl who says her own father is embarrassed to tell the neighbors where she is. On the way, we stop once at an overlook to gaze at the vast wilderness. As far as we can see there are only valleys and peaks covered with forest. The silence is absolute.

Back in the city there is the pleasure of a big meal eaten at a table with friends. But though I enjoy it, I miss the simple beauty of the Zen eating ritual. I also reflect on something Phillip Wilson said: "When you're nowhere, three steps in any direction are three steps from the center of the universe." Sometime, I might return for a longer stay at Zen Mountain.