

Years of Expensive Zen Training



Gone to Waste

Interview by
Paul Maxwell

David Chadwick was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1945. After dropping out of college and a stint as a political activist, he "joined the westward hippie migration" to San Francisco in 1966. There he soon met the now legendary Japanese Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, whose book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, has become a modern classic. Chadwick devoted himself to Zen practice, and when Suzuki died five years later he continued his studies with Richard Baker Roshi, Suzuki's chosen successor. He later left his position as head monk at California's Tassajara Monastery to "become less of a [Zen] company man," and came to Japan in 1988. He is the author of *Thank You & OK: An American Zen Failure in Japan* (reviewed in the Fall '94 issue of L&A).

L&A: Is *Thank You & OK* your first book?

DC: Yes, *Thank You* is my first book, though I've been writing prose, poems and music since I was in the third grade.

L&A: It's supposed to be fantastically difficult for new authors to get published. Did you have any trouble?

DC: I don't know anything about the difficulty of being published. Look at the first paragraph of the acknowledgements. I was writing anyway and my agent friend said here's a computer, keep it up and I'll take care of the rest. Not a very helpful example; I'm sorry.

But maybe the reason it came to me is that I'd done a heck of a lot of homework and I definitely had something to write about that I'd spent a lot of time on.

L&A: How is the book doing?

The book is doing okay - it's being reprinted. My editor's assistant just told me today and when I asked if the corrections were included - and there are some Japanese errors that embarrass me - she said that I should be celebrating instead of worrying. Good advice.

L&A: You lived in Japan for what, four years? Why did you leave? John Morley, in *Pictures From the Water Trade*, said he knew it was time to go home when he started bowing to people over the telephone. Was there a trigger like that for you?

DC: I was in Japan exactly four years and left because it was time to go, though losing our wonderful house was the catalyst, which you can read about in "Building a Fumidai," part one of the epilogue of *Thank You*. I was back there in the spring to do interviews for a biography of Shunryu Suzuki that I'm working on now, and it was great to be back - especially to see the gang in Kyoto, but I visited other parts as well. Let's see, what do I mean by "it was time to go." We liked it but wanted to be in the States again. We were making good

money, had good friends, liked the temple next door and had a pleasant lifestyle. But maybe we weren't learning at the same rate, maybe getting a little stagnant. I think that knowing when to quit things, the timing of the changes in our lives, is very, very important. And I think we left at just the right time. There was no trigger I can think of except for losing the house. I did bow to people back in the States, though, like in stores and at street corners.

L&A: MacArthur is supposed to have said that Japan is a nation of twelve year olds. What do you think?

DC: I think that all nations, cultures and peoples are insane and humorous and wonderful and undeveloped in various ways. But clearly one of the problems of the Japanese is that they live in an authoritarian culture where others decide things for them and they've got as many rules as possible so they can learn to do what they're told from an early age and they are discouraged from becoming self-determining, free-thinking, independent fully mature people. But I think that all over the country there are people who are aware of that and are making a valiant effort to assert themselves and think for themselves. Back here in the States there are a lot of mean, ugly, weird, goofy things going on that we've got to work on as best we can. One thing about Japan's situation though, as I see it - and

I'm no expert, just a takuan barrel philosopher - - is that they need outside help because they are in the grips of a somewhat uncentralized, limiting, humiliating and entrenched authority. I think it's just being good friends and neighbors to encourage them to grow up and wake up in every way possible, but as we do so it might be a good policy to apologize and to point out our own limitless faults and say, "See, we can talk about ours and you can talk about ours and maybe we can talk about yours too." It's not being nosy or interfering in what isn't our business because I think that the Japanese are destroying more of the world per capita than anyone else and we would all benefit if their government and corporations had to answer to the citizenry. And don't let them give you any Zen type intimidating reasons why you should keep your mouth shut and

look straight ahead - that's just part of the control system. They in turn have so much to offer in terms of helping the whole world to wake up and grow up and I thank them for all they've done and given us up to this point and beg them for more — *gambatte kudasai!*

L&A: They've given us Zen, but it came wrapped in Japanese culture. Should we -- can we -- separate the two?

DC: You can't separate the two so easily in Japan, but Zen is just your basic no-nature so in its purest sense it is beyond culture. It depends on what level we're talking about. If we're talking about the culture around Zen, it will take on different forms in different places, right? But some people of course get all caught up in this way and that way of doing things, nitpicky Dogen stuff, teeth-gritting koan work, whatever. At the San Francisco Zen Center

Suzuki Roshi said that he only knew the Japanese Soto way and so that was what he taught, and he said we would have to make American Zen on our own, but it won't work if we're in too big a hurry. "It's not like passing a football." Anyway, rest assured that whatever we do, we will be constantly falling into pits interspersed with serene moments resting under trees.

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L&A: For Western practitioners, do you recommend coming to Japan?

DC: I don't want to recommend anything and I would especially not recommend that -- but some people who are particularly interested in experiencing Zen in Japan can't be stopped and some of these people have found a niche that they like. I think some people are pleased with what they learned from certain teachers and found at certain temples, but there are a heck of a lot more who can't find a place to fit in and have disappointing experiences. Especially if people want to advance or be accepted on an equal level with Japanese, it can be terribly frustrating to try to study Zen here. There's a lot of neurotic weirdness in the Zen world just like everywhere, but it seems to be rewarding to a small number of seekers, especially those who are willing to accept a life of eternally running after enlightenment. Mainly I think we must keep our eyes open, take responsibility for

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what we do, and let no head rise above our own. Those are all orthodox Buddhist admonitions too.

L&A: What are the differences between Zen centers or monasteries in the US and Japan?

DC: There's a greater spectrum of forms and possibilities in the US. It's a lot looser in the US, with more of a lay orientation which includes a lot of confusion about priest and lay. Another difference is that Japan has its Zen identity established, so the weakness is rigidity, but the strength is solid like hara. In the US there's a groping, searching, an openness and humility. The Japanese put on a better front — to say the least. They've got it down, play the roles better, and don't have other agendas. Americans in the US who try to be Zen big shots pretty much fall on their face. Thank Buddha. We're messy and can't hide our faults. My personal vision for the future of Zen does not include the establishment of strong institutions and flawless leaders, so I'm quite happy with bumbling, awkward US Zen. It may dissolve into our bones rather than make a good museum piece.

L&A: Are there any "enlightened" American teachers?

DC: Got me. I think that enlightenment does mean something, but I have no idea what. I think there's a lot of wishful thinking about enlightenment, false gods and blah. I don't believe in final resting places. There seem to be lots of people following their hearts with integrity and trying to help each other wake up. We meet people who help us to wake up. Some say, "Only I know. They don't really know." I'm not interested in enlightenment as an exclusive club.

L&A: In America, "Zen" and "Zen Buddhism" are not necessarily the same. "Zen" is often used, or mis-used, to mean a technique or a strategy - "Management Zen," "Zen and the Art of Internet" and the like.

DC: That's just a popular use of the word and

it's fine. It's just like Japanese English. I don't use the word that way. To me, Zen and Zen Buddhism are the same banana peel.

L&A: American Buddhists seem to be much more concerned with morality than Asian Buddhists.

DC: Oh gosh yes. There are all sorts of different camps and points of view not only from group to group but within groups. There is a lot of talk going on about morality and teachers and rules and ethics and do's and don'ts. That's the US. There's a dark side to it but a good side to it also. We bring things out and talk about them. Some think we drag Buddhism down into a mud wrestling match. But there's a lot of compassion too. We have the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and lots of US Buddhists in helping professions. In Okayama I had a doctor English student who was deeply interested in hospice work, and he couldn't believe there were Buddhist hospices in America. He thought that all hospices were Christian and that Buddhist priests only care about money or, if they're sincere, just want to get high on satori and leave their and everyone else's problems behind. Anyway, US Buddhism is stuck with this morality struggle.

L&A: The subtitle of our book is, "An American Zen Failure in Japan." But you weren't chasing enlightenment, were you? In what sense are you a "Zen failure?"

DC: I wasn't chasing enlightenment? I wouldn't put it below me — I've made every mistake possible and continue to find new expressions of "one continuous mistake." The subtitle sets a tone for the book — one of imperfection and humor. It's a screwy thing to say, an oxymoron, and it hits a nerve in the heart of many seekers. Most of us start off on the path with neat packaged ideas of attaining something final, and there is so much idealizing and romanticizing about Zen and Japan. But it also does say that I don't see myself as having understood Zen or life, and I'm not saying that others haven't. But even Zen failure is no place where I can rest. There is a spot in the book

where I tell Taizen that I'm not a priest, I've failed, and he tells me to cut the reverse arrogance. Anyway, as I see it, Zen and the essence of life have no end and there is no permanent reality to any success or failure. But in relative terms we can say tentatively that we have succeeded or failed.

L&A: On the back of the book jacket there is a great one liner from [American Zen teacher] Richard Baker. He said of you, "Years of expensive Zen training gone to waste." Is there a story behind that quote?

DC: Baker Roshi said that to me one day at Green Gulch as he was putting on his robes to go to the Zendo and he had to stop to straighten me up and make me look presentable. He said it affectionately and in jest but with all of the implications one can imagine.

L&A: Howard Rheingold [author and former editor of *Whole Earth Review*] said recently, "David Chadwick is a far worse, far purer degenerate than I could ever hope to be." What's that all about?

DC: I know Howard from the *Whole Earth Catalogue and Review* office when I was a guest editor for a section on Japan for the upcoming issue, and though we don't know each other well we get along just fine. There's a lot of play in the way we relate and there's some scoffing at purity in both of our attitudes. I considered it the highest of compliments coming from him.

L&A: You got around quite a bit while you were living in Japan. Do you have any favorite places you'd like to share?

DC: I suggest that people try out the International Villas that Okayama-ken has to offer. They are just for foreigners and a terrific deal. Bicycling in Hokkaido is a treat and we loved the Northern island of Rebun and hanging out with Ainu around *rozemburo* (outdoor hot springs) in the center of Hokkaido. There's a hot springs creek on the Northeastern peninsula that cascades down a mountain with many hot pools -it's at the end of a gravel road and not many people go there. Miyajima's a neat place to go to after visiting the Peace Park at Hiroshima, which is a must, though I wholeheartedly agree with Dave Barry's assessment of the place as found in his very funny *Dave Barry Does Japan*, in which he bemoans the lack of historical context with which the horrible event is portrayed. I like Takayama and the best place to stay there must be Zenkoji, a small temple with a few guest rooms that almost no one knows about. I could go on and on but that's enough.

L&A: Reading *Thank You and OK*, it seems that you had a knack for uncritically accepting everyone and everything you ran into in Japan. But you're obviously worried about Japanese indifference to environmental concerns.

DC: I love Japan and the Japanese and I think we can learn a lot from each other and should cooperate with each other and everyone else in developing a tolerant, broad, light, sustainable way of living on the earth and we should believe that this is possible. Aside from various approaches to Buddhism, Japan's bountiful gifts to the world include of course martial arts (my gosh, what an enormous contribution to world culture) and other ways and arts like flower arranging, gardens, tea, their pottery, archery, carpentry. And the Japanese have all these approaches to everything, though each way tends to be isolated, a world unto itself uninterested in any other ways. To me they just make the world a more interesting place. They add so much to the complexity of things, though there's an emphasis on simplicity. They're such fanatics and have so much energy, from nervous to deep, and they've created so much for the vast ocean of beings and being. But I think they are also giving us world destruction and we must help them to stop their corporations from being enemies of organic life. This applies to all institutions worldwide of course, but I do think that Japanese corporate despoiling is a particular problem on a grand scale. I think about this a lot. I wish they could see that destroying the Borneo rainforest is like destroying Japan - like Japan it's one of the priceless sacred infinite worlds within our world. I think that a lot of Japanese think that their world is separate and the only one worth saving - but that can be overcome with some effort.

