

Life

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FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

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RELIGION

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

How did a self-described good ol' boy from Fort Worth become a Zen Buddhist priest, voluntarily cloister himself in a remote Japanese monastery and wind up writing a book about the experience?

While David Chadwick is the only Texan "Zenny" who's written a book about his experiences — *Thank You and Okay: An American Zen Failure in Japan* (Arkana/Penguin paperback, \$13.95) — he says there are several others running around Japan and at the San Francisco Zen Center, where his own explorations began more than 20 years ago.

An odd coincidence to find so many Texans making the same journey?

"Not really," Chadwick said during a recent telephone conversation from his home in San Rafael, Calif. "There's always been a lot of individ-

ualism and diversity in Texas. Come to think of it, only half wanted to be part of the Confederacy.

"In any case, being a Zen Buddhist is no more weird than being a Baptist," said Chadwick, who attended Fort Worth's Lily B. Clayton Elementary, McLean Middle School and Paschal High. "We may wear different clothes, but in the end we're all on the same journey, all seeking the same thing."

Nonetheless, the 49-year-old writer maintains he doesn't identify with Zen. And if that sounds implausible for a man who's been a Zen priest for 23 years and written a 454-page book about his experiences, it doesn't really surprise friends and family here.

Chadwick, we're told, has a penchant for statements that are delivered for shock value. He calls it "food for thought."

Of course the book's cover — depicting a Chadwick caricature grin-

Tex-Zen

A good ol' boy tries Buddhism, and fails wonderfully



David Chadwick poses in this photo from the early 1970s.

ning foolishly from an oversized matchbox amid the sacred trappings of a Buddhist temple — plainly states that this is an account of an American Zen failure in Japan.

Does that make Chadwick a fallen "Zenny?" Not quite, it seems.

"'By winter I'm a Buddhist, by summer I'm a nudist...,' that's from John Gould, an old Bohemian poet who lived in Greenwich Village," he said, "That just about sums me up."

Ten minutes into the interview, it becomes obvious that David Chadwick is as elusive as "a little fish darting about in the water," an image he uses to describe his mind while practicing *zazen*, or meditation.

Isn't there anything he's serious about? He chuckles, clearly enjoying the discomfiture he causes. Then he grows quiet.

"Look, there is something I am very serious about," Chadwick said. "I'm serious about having fun. I don't

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care what name we give religion. I say: Let us learn to enjoy ourselves and help each other.

"Religion is like fish. It stinks if you let it lie around," he said.

Chadwick's monastic interlude in Japan lasted all of six weeks, but the experience is recounted with relish and amazing attention to minutiae. Dress and food, ritual and responsibility are described in painful detail. So, too, are the interpersonal relationships between the Japanese and American monks.

Complex Buddhist dogma is explained in a refreshingly approachable manner, anecdotally. Some vignettes read like period theater, others like an Abbot and Costello routine, with Chadwick always in the role of jester.

Some of the most profound conversations take place when he's performing kitchen duties with fellow monks. On one occasion they discuss the various levels of enlightenment, including the person who has no possibility of entering nirvana, pure enlightenment.

The Japanese monks believe that no such individual exists.

Chadwick reduces them to "writhing puddles" of laughter when he declares that he is the one single person in the universe who can never become enlightened.

"I am *namagomi* [raw garbage], please bury me," he solemnly pleads.

This is the same fellow who, as a senior at Paschal High (class of '63), inscribed a friend's yearbook: "Believe in me and I shall grant you eternal life."

When his monastic retreat is over, Chadwick travels around Japan, joined by his girlfriend Elin, the book explains. They marry and live next door to another temple where David continues to work on his *koan*, the Zen term for the seemingly inscrutable riddle that seekers must contemplate as the object of their meditation, as in, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The couple support themselves by teaching English privately for 3½ years. Neither has a work permit, but immigration officials don't seem to care. It is explained that the Japanese need English teachers as much as they need Thai prostitutes and illegal laborers from Bangladesh.

TO THINK SLOW

Zen

All the while, the Chadwicks provide Japanese friends with a crash course on things American. Often confirming Japan's worst suspicions about American cultural barbarism, the couple furnish their home with treasures culled from Dumpsters. And, further shocking male acquaintances, they do the household chores. But when neighbors call David a feminist for doing the dishes and making public displays of affection toward his wife.

Encouraged by their approval, Chadwick exhorts the members of women's club to step forward and take a more prominent role in shaping the destiny of their children and grandchildren.

"Surely you would nurture the world," he tells them, "if we could just keep men in the kitchens." His eyes light up and backs straighten, she writes, but that's about all.

Despite all the years David Chadwick has spent living as a self-described semi-hippie in California — to say nothing of the time he wandered around Latin America's intercultural scene — it is his hometown that frequently surfaces in his book about Japan.

Thelma Chadwick, his mother, conveyed a copy of *Thank You and Goodnight* in her comfortable home in Fort Worth's Tanglewood addition, where she is surrounded by

family photographs and memorabilia.

"I've been waiting for this to happen for 20 years," she said with a smile that conveyed both pride and reproach. "I always felt that David should be a writer, but of course it would have been wrong to put any pressure on him."

And the Fort Worth woman pronounces herself unsurprised that her son became a Buddhist monk, explaining, "David's always been a wanderer and a seeker. In a sense, you might say he'd been preparing for this all his life." Otherwise, "He was just a regular boy."

But a childhood friend remembers there was something different.

"In a white middle-class environment where discipline was not a problem, and where everybody was pretty much like everybody else, you could always count on him to be outrageous," said David O'Brien, who met Chadwick at Clayton Elementary more than three decades ago.

But O'Brien added, "I find it deliciously ironic that a man as gregarious as David Chadwick should be attracted to an Eastern religion that demands solitude and stillness."

But Chadwick himself sees no irony in his chosen path.

"Most people seem to have this idea of Buddhists as being these

perfect people who've conquered all their mistakes," he said. "But Buddhism doesn't make you perfect. Nor does it demand a sensory cutoff."

So what led Chadwick to his spiritual quest?

"This is something I acquired from my father, who died when I was not quite 12 years old, but who had a profound influence on my life," he said. "He was what you might call a Bodhichitta, which is Sanskrit for 'seeker.'"

His father, Kelroy Chadwick, was a homebuilder and a Christian Scientist who later turned to the study of eschatology, a little-known offshoot of Christian Science whose followers included Dr. Albert Schweitzer.

Chadwick finds parallels between eschatology and Buddhism: "There is no god outside of our everyday life and mind," he explained. "The highest ultimate reality of the universe is right here in front of us. That's traditional Buddhist wisdom for you."

It was time for a final question. Was he really a Zen failure?

"Ah, but that's the ultimate riddle of my story," Chadwick said. "I'm not going to answer that one. I have a book to sell."

Details: David Chadwick will appear twice next week at Borders Books & Music: 7 p.m. Tuesday at the store at 10720 Preston Road, Dallas, and 7 p.m. Wednesday at the store at 4613 S. Hulene St., Fort Worth.