

Mixing zen with a little cowboy zest

By Dan Webster
Staff writer

If you were to ask the average American to describe a Zen priest, you might hear about some bald Asian man encased in robes who appears now and then on public-access television.

Or maybe you'd be forced to recall David Carradine on "Kung Fu."

Well, David Chadwick has been known to shave his head on occasion. He knows how to chant, too. But he's from Texas, not Tokyo. And he's never appeared on a fit television show.

And yet he is a Zen priest.

He's also a writer whose first book, "Thank You and OK! An American Zen Failure in Japan,"

details his four-year stay in Japan as student of Zen, teacher of English and observer of Japanese culture.

Chadwick will read from his book and answer questions about his experiences Wednesday evening at the downtown branch of the Spokane Public Library.

As a reading experience,

"Thank You and OK!" offers something for everyone. Overall, it is a primer in Zen, the Buddhist discipline that stresses meditation and the contemplation of puzzling questions (or koans).

At the same time, Chadwick explores the numerous inherent differences between the United States and Japan.

And he does so from the perspective of a Zen cowboy, a laughing Buddha whose thirst for life ends up endearing him — well, most of the time — not only to his readers but to the most rigid of the many Japanese nationals whom he encounters.

"The key to enjoying yourself in Japan is: Don't try to be Japanese," he said during a recent phone interview from a Portland radio station. "They're wonderful hosts, but as soon as you're trying to be one of them, it's extremely demanding. And there's no place to lay your head."

Time and again in his book, Chadwick describes situations in which, Zen study or no, it appears doubtful that east and west will ever meet.

"Being in Japan is sort of like being in Texas in the '50s," he said. "To them, we were big, smelly people with a lot of soul and rhythm. And they envied our sexiness and how much we enjoyed life. But they weren't about to really integrate us into their world. Sound familiar?"

Chadwick should know. Now 49, he grew up the child of a Texas couple who, spiritually at least, embraced the Lone Star state's traditional penchant for eccentric individualism.

"My mother and father were interested passionately in the transcendental Christian tradition," he said. "So I grew up around a non-theistic, non-dualistic type of Christianity that was quite related to the Buddhism that I ran into later."

That run-in occurred in the mid-'60s after he had made only a token gesture at going to



Book reading

David Chadwick will read from "Thank You and OK!" and answer questions about his experiences at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the downtown branch of the Spokane Public Library, W906 Main.

college. "I only did it to placate my mother," he said.

After that, Chadwick kept busy embracing the lifestyle that came to define the '60s: "I did civil rights work; SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), lived in Mexico, took LSD and, you know, smoked a lot of grass."

It was the LSD that led him in 1966 to the San Francisco Zen Center, where he became involved in the communal, meditative atmosphere of that spiritual congregation.

"I loved the meditation, I loved the communal life, I loved my teachers, Suzuki Roshi and Katagiri Roshi," he said.

"And also we didn't have to believe anything. In Buddhism, you don't take on a set of beliefs, necessarily."

At least, he added, "I didn't feel like we did."

In 1988, after 20 years of Zen study in the United States, Chadwick decided to visit Japan. The experience would give him a chance to reconnect with his teacher, Katagiri Roshi, and to fulfill his "long-held dream of seeing the country of my spiritual teachers."

"Thank You and OK!" documents much of what occurred during his stay, from the way he fit (or, quite often, didn't fit) in with the politics of temple life to how he endured in the Byzantine face of Japanese government bureaucracy.

He based the book on his journal entries and on the many letters he wrote to friends. The finished manuscript, he says, bears the distinctive mark of his wife, Elin, 32.

"Her sage counsel was extremely important," he said.

"She said, 'If you tell everything and say everything, it's sort of like filling a room with cement. Whereas,

what you should be doing while writing a book is building a sculpture. You need to chip away at it and just give the readers a little bit.'"

Most often, his Japanese experience was made bearable, if not enjoyable, by his ever-present sense of humor, which in itself is a reflection of his Zen training.

"As the book's subtitle indicates, integrating the negative parts, integrating our failures, the mud and the delusion within our lives and not trying to run from it, turns all the yucky parts of our life into fertilizer," he said. "They help us grow into nice, strong, happy plants."

Sounds like simple bumper-sticker philosophy, doesn't it? No matter. The laughter in his voice acted as an effective counterbalance.

However, when addressing the possibility of whether Japan and the United States would ever, despite their differences, be able to achieve a mutual level of acceptance, Chadwick was a bit more serious — and cautious.

"The only real place right now we're cooperating in is destroying the world," he said. "We have to change that into a cooperation that helps make the world a place of peace. And to keep the world in one piece, not use the whole thing up."

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Book Review



THANK YOU AND OK! An American Zen Failure in Japan by David Chadwick Penguin Books, 454 pages Paperback \$13.95

a review by Laurette Langille

"Thank You And OK!" author David Chadwick's rollicking (never rambling) chronicle of his adventures and misadventures in Japan was well crafted, clever, inspiring and educational for this reader. With the clear vision that only hindsight allows, Chadwick invites the reader to travel with him and share the unraveling illusions of his days in a Japanese Zen monastery and as a lay Zen student teaching English. This journey is abundant in humor, both zany and subtle.

The book's lighthearted approach about initiation into the Japanese communities culture and monastery life is impressive because it is respectful to both. Chadwick achieves this balancing act while gently shuffling his diary-like entries between his early monastery visit and his later layperson experience.

"Thank You And OK!" also has its serious and introspective moments. Chadwick's ability to share his experiences gives the reader a bittersweet taste of his disappointments, grief and growth.

The book was a quick read since I didn't want to put it down. Thank you and kaō!

EDITORS NOTE: David Chadwick will appear at Village Books in Fairhaven for a reading, talk and book signing on Friday, August 19th at 7:30 p.m. Admission is FREE. For information call 671-2626.