

Interview with Ed Brown, one of the leading Zen Priests and student of founder Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who brought Zen to the U.S. in the 1960's and wrote the famous best-seller, "Zen Mind – Beginner's Mind."

About the founding of Tassajara: Founded in 1966 as a meditation society, it was formerly a hot springs resort, and is the first Zen monastery in the USA. The spiritual founder was Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. Another very important figure was Dirk Baker, a charismatic financier and organizer. After the death of Suzuki Roshi, Baker became his successor. He was previously legitimized by Suzuki in a ceremony and concentrates on management. Because many students and priests wanted to lead a spiritual life above all, and were looking for a spiritual leader, he was criticized for his Western-based management-and-life-style (for example, his BMW). Suzuki's grounding principle for Tassajara was to give as many people as possible the chance to study Zen, and to establish an ongoing, serious center for meditation.

About Ed Brown: Ed Brown left college in 1964, when he was 20, already fascinated with Asian wisdom, and was a student of Suzuki. He began in the Tassajara kitchen, and because of his culinary talents, soon rose to the position of cook. He spent only three weeks in Japan. Suzuki soon found out that it was not good for most of his students to study in Japan, because the cultural differences and the language barrier were too extreme. Brown saw himself more as a priest than a monk. He found a wife in Tassajara, with whom he has a daughter. He has dedicated his entire life to the study and practice of Zen.

A life only for Zen? Did that make sense? He came with the typical sense of doubt and forlornness to Tassajara and found himself there – he calls it "re-parenting."

Is all the pain from the typical Zen sitting position, the Lotus position, really necessary for the spiritual experience? He needed 10 years to find a reasonably good sitting position for himself. Sometimes he had the feeling that so much pain must be good for his spiritual development, and that he would be rewarded with a lot of light at the end of the tunnel. But maybe there is no light, and the pain just keeps on. Therefore he found out that it is sometimes better just to move the painful leg. And in his view it is better for the soul to tell that to the others, rather than to talk them into the fact that the suffering is necessary. Rather, the important thing is to reach the right level of pain, so that one feels and is awake, but on the other hand, is not blocked by the pain.

About greed and the vulnerability of man: We are always searching for something more (money, sex, status, power) and from others something less (sorrow, grief, anger, disappointment). That is the system of desire that controls many people.

About female Zen priests in Tassajara: The founders made the decision to let women study Zen, thereby upsetting a thousand-year-old tradition, but the necessary financial aspects of the purchase of Tassajara in the USA made one thing clear: no women - no Tassajara. Group bathing, which in the beginning was conducted very properly, was eventually forbidden by Suzuki and the problem of too much sexual activity was pragmatically solved by hard work, so there was neither time nor energy for excesses.

About the future: Tassajara has achieved its proper size, and is fully established. The tendency is not to let it get bigger, but rather to train students who will then found their own centers. In Tassajara, there are monks, priests (who can be married and live a normal life), students who stay a number of years to learn about themselves and summer students who combine their services for guests (kitchen, household, office, garden) with their spiritual

work. Tassajara is open for half the year through the summer for guests to visit the workshops and meditation retreats, which on the one hand contributes to the financing of the project and on the other secures its connection to the outside world.

How one becomes a Zen priest: During the winter, there are no guests and only spiritual work is done. To be accepted as a full-time student, one must perform one to two years of work or bring recommendations from teachers from other centers. There is no entrance exam, as in Japan where students in many monasteries must kneel for hours on wooden floors before the exam to prove their earnestness. There is however a five day meditation retreat where one must only sit except for the sleeping time, which can be a great challenge.

Who should come to Tassajara: Ed is happy for all who come to Tassajara to discover something about themselves and their lives, but also for all those who will never come, he wishes they find something in their lives that can open their hearts - be it family, a job, hospice work or whatever else.

About Zen and death: Zen does not include the definite reincarnation beliefs of the Tibetan Buddhists. Rather it is thought, that if you have learned your whole life long to live in the moment, when you are faced with death, you will know exactly what you must do.

Personal thoughts of the author about Tassajara; It is not a place that captures you at first sight, as Esalen does. Tassajara works slowly. The constant sound of flowing water, the baths, the hard, cold wood floors in the Shendo (meditation hall) and the friendly people who greet each other with the Buddhist bow and guests with a heartfelt “Hi”. Conspicuous among all the priests and students is a ramrod straight posture, which comes from meditation. The center is very well organized. Everything starts punctually on the minute, and is announced by the ringing of bell or drumbeats, from the morning meditation at 5:45, through breakfast, until the evening meal punctually at 7. At night there are only oil lamps. That give one back the sensations of night and darkness. When one starts to explore the surroundings, one finds a unique wilderness and a landscape of beauty. The workshop that I signed up for, “Yoga and Meditation” is usually booked up months in advance. Sleeping accommodations in Tassajara are sought after, and therefore scarce, since most of the first-time visitors come again. 90% of the participants are women, many of whom are Jewish, who regularly practice yoga and meditation. Tassajara is a very feminine place. For many, a week at Tassajara is part of an all-too-short American vacation. It is not a place where one acquires superficial wisdom. The day’s first one-hour meditation at 5:45 takes place without instruction, together with the priests. If the guests ask if it was correctly done, and how it is supposed to go, they will be answered with loving irony and advised that there is no “correct” method, and that rules only cause false expectations, that the reason for the severe sitting position is, above all, that one should concentrate on form and not dwell too much on one’s own thoughts. Zen is not, by the way, the ability to think about nothing, as many believe, but rather, the ability to not let your thoughts become the property of your intellect and your will.