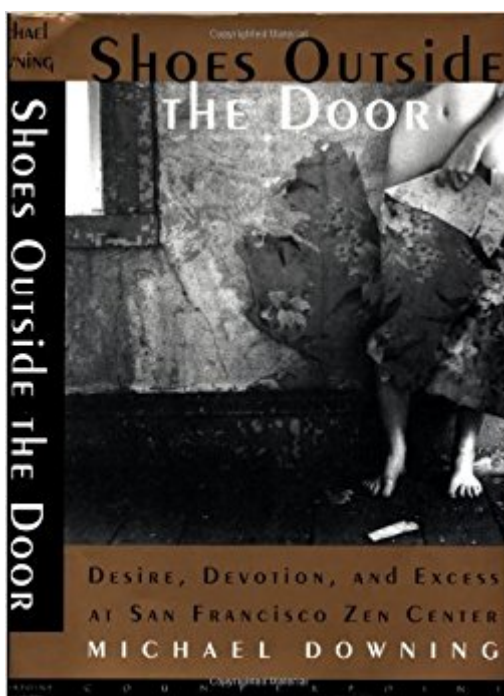


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Shoes Outside The Door: Desire, Devotion And Excess At San Francisco Zen Center



Synopsis

Words not normally associated with contemplative practice exploded from the headlines when a series of interconnected scandals rocked San Francisco Zen Center. By the late 1970s, San Francisco Zen Center had -under the spiritual leadership of its founder, Shunryu Suzuki, and his Dharma heir, Richard Baker-grown to be hugely successful, accruing wealth, property, and prestige, its aesthetics tinged with the glamour of celebrity. Zen Center's holdings included Tassajara Hot Springs near Big Sur, Green Gulch Farm in Marin County, a clothing company, and a bakery. The Tassajara Bread Book was riding the best-seller lists and Greens, its wildly successful upscale vegetarian restaurant on the San Francisco Bay, was inspiring an entire generation of restaurant professionals. Hundreds of students who had come to dedicate their lives to Zen practice, to reinventing Buddhism in America, found themselves serving dinner to the famous: Linda Ronstadt, then-Governor Jerry Brown, Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Bateson, Paul Hawken, Ken Kesey, Stewart Brand. For a long moment, Zen Center seemed to be the hot core of the counterculture. Then a sex scandal rocked Zen Center and brought into question Baker's abuse of power and spiritual authority. And before Zen Center had a chance to recover, Baker's replacement as Abbott was arrested for brandishing a handgun at the door of a neighbor's house. The repercussions were so profound as to call some to question the entire matter of alternative religious practice in America. Was this jewel of the counterculture fated to dissolve in a meltdown of its own making? Michael Downing has spent the past three years studying Zen Center documents and interviewing more than eighty people who were there, at ground zero. Every person who had a role in these events has a singular point of view, and as these multiple tellings are woven together we see a truth as coherent and complicated as Indra's net-a web in which each intersection of thread holds a jewel that reflects all the other jewels at all the other intersections. As engaging as any mystery, as mysterious as any political campaign, as political as any family gathering, this story will haunt and challenge its readers as they attempt to make their own sense of what really happened.

Book Information

Hardcover: 384 pages

Publisher: Counterpoint Press (October 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1582431132

ISBN-13: 978-1582431130

Product Dimensions: 9.6 x 6.5 x 1.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 49 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #289,965 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #112 in Books > History > World > Religious > Buddhism #282 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > Zen > Philosophy #364 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > Zen > Spirituality

Customer Reviews

Why did the richest, most influential, highest flying Zen center in America crash and burn in 1983? Novelist Michael Downing wondered the same thing, and after three years of interviewing members and poring over documents, his *Shoes Outside the Door* tells the story. Womanizing, BMW-driving Richard Baker was the abbot and visionary behind the rapid growth of the San Francisco Zen Center, but in many ways he was the antithesis of his teacher and predecessor, the inimitable and revered Shunryu Suzuki, who would choose the bruised apples out of compassion. After the early death of Suzuki, a blind and driven cult formed around Baker, seemingly filling the void until this "Dick Nixon of Zen" finally slept with his best friend's wife and brought his world crashing to the ground. Working with direct quotations from students and workers of the Center and its many enterprises, Downing delivers a page-turning exposé of a community that is as laudable as it is laughable. And as an outsider to both the community and Buddhism, he does it with wit and an even hand. --Brian Bruya

This intense investigation/indictment from novelist Downing (*Breakfast with Scot*, etc.) uncovers the alleged abuses of power of Richard Baker, former abbot of the nation's most influential Zen center. Downing devoted three years to exploring how and why Baker, the only Dharma heir of Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC), was toppled from the abbacy of SFZC by popular demand in 1983. He interviewed more than 80 participants in Baker's rise and fall, not including the disgraced abbot himself, who sent Downing a letter explaining his position. Downing tells the story with a novelist's attention to character and detail, and what unfolds is a gripping account of how the bright and charismatic Baker helped Suzuki and Zen gain a foothold in the West; took over SFZC; expanded its activities dramatically (by, among other initiatives, creating the fabled Greens restaurant); grew increasingly alienated from his followers while surrounding himself with celebrities and physical luxury; and finally stumbled by having an affair with the wife of one of

SFZC's main backers. The problem with the book, and it's a serious one, is that Downing takes sides; for example, he refutes point by point the text of Baker's letter to him. What might have been a grand account of the making of a tragedy, then, is instead a mitigated tale of villainy. Yet because the debacle at SFZC holds lessons for anyone who cares about how religious structures, perforce hierarchical, can and should operate within a democratic society, this book deserves a wide reading, and not only by the many Buddhists who will buy it lickety-split. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

There's a fine line between the spiritual and the psychopathic, and it's often not easy to tell. Sometimes those we trust the most can deceive us the most. Perhaps this is a reminder that too much of a good thing is a bad thing. Even indulgence in Zen will lead to troubles; everything in moderation, including Zen. It's scary to think that practicing Zen can increase the Machiavellian potential inside some people. Even in a religion without god, minimal dogma, and complete freedom to leave at any time, people still fall into the traps of the cult of personalities and the worship of gurus. Perhaps Zen is simply the practice of rationalizing all your actions to make perfect bulls*** excuses. I read the whole book in a few hours as soon as I received it. Great page turner and also very thought provoking and introspective at the same time. There's a spiritual master and a monster inside all of our souls.

In the pop-psych of the 60s and 70s who else was around for Richard Baker to RELATE to? Now, the BMW makes sense! In the wake of Clinton/Monica, even Richard Baker makes sense. He had his groupies and wanna-bes. San Francisco Zen Center survived. All three locations survived. We (almost) all survived. Amazing! This book is MORE than it appears to be on the surface. It is very painful to read until it is no longer painful. It becomes therapeutic after a fashion, dragging the shadow-makers out into the light and revealing them to be just like us - in our most delusional moments. Of course it was unfortunate that Zen Center started out as a Sole Corporation of Richard Baker. Except the Suzuki part managed to remain as Baker departed. There were a lot of errors made - by everyone who was there. The ship went adrift for years. This book allows that sense of shared responsibility, or lack thereof, to finally emerge and presses us with the question: "Why were the voices kept silent?" That is the rub. I disassociated - as a transient participant - in 1982. Therefore I missed 'the perfect storm.' If you are a Zen wanna-be, this is a MUST READ. It's amazing, 30 years on, how many of us keep the practice and stay to the path. Today, I again donate to ZC - it is worthy of that - but rarely attend. If you are in town, drop in for a visit.

While I visited Green Gulch once many years ago, I was not involved with the San Francisco Zen Center. I have been a practicing Lay Buddhist for over 30 years. I have seen problems in groups I have attended. While they were not as severe as those at the San Francisco center, they point to a huge question for Western Buddhists: Where is the line between blind trust in a teacher and opening your heart to the teaching? SHOES OUTSIDE THE DOOR shows what can happen when blind trust is given to one person. While it is easy to center all the blame on the teacher, the book does a good investigating many people involved in the mess. To their credit, some of those involved admit that they ignored large, bright red flags; others (including Mr Baker) seem to have learned very little. Some showed awareness that for a teacher to overstep his/her bounds, the student must understep his/her bounds. One lesson that became clear to me as I read about these problems was that many in the leadership of the San Francisco Zen Center ironically ignored a central teaching of their founder: Keep the beginner's mind, the mind of humility, the mind that says "I could be wrong." The one missing thing in this book may have been beyond the scope of the book: What about the consequences of being too wary of Zen teachers and not opening up the heart to the many teachers who have kept the beginner's mind?

Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center is an entirely fascinating history of the SF Zen Center, written with an understanding of the practice that informs the reason for the Zen Center's being. Personally familiar with the place and its history and some of the people, the book was a revelation. If one had never visited Tassajara or Green Gulch, or Green's Restaurant for example, the beauty of these places would not be in one's mind's eye while reading, and I am not sure if the history revealed in the book would be quite as comprehensible, as the extraordinary effort that went into creating Zen Center is reflected in the exquisite quality of these places. The, by definition, elusive nature of the practice of zazen, doesn't lend itself to explication to those who don't practice it and this makes the book an even greater achievement.

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