

BOOK REVIEWS



Ambivalent Zen by Lawrence Shainberg. Pantheon, New York.
Reviewed by Judy Roitman.

Poor Larry Shainberg. His father, rich, bipolar, trapped entirely within his frontal lobes, is taken with the books of Alan Watts, the teachings of Krishnamurti and the promise of, not just psychotherapy, but psychotherapy by one of the leaders of the human potential movement. How is an unsure-of-himself adolescent to resist? So the teenage Larry Shainberg, whose mainly wants to play a great game of basketball or tennis and impress some girl, finds himself reading Watts and Herrigel, meeting Watts, being welcomed into Krishnamurti's inner circle, and beginning a long, long course of therapy whose goal is to understand oneself and, therefore, by its own definitions of "self" and "understanding," can never really end.

All of these people—Watts, Krishnamurti, Shainberg's therapist, Shainberg's father—discourage formal practice, even as they parallel the teachings that come from serious practice. Having Buddhist doctrine shoved down your teenage throat, and Buddhist practice belittled—imagine that! That Shainberg ever started to practice is amazing. But he did, and he practiced hard and long, first with Eido Roshi, then with a karate teacher named Chang, then with Bernard Glassman. Finally he found his true teacher, the Rinzai master Kyudo Roshi. Eventually he wrote this memoir.

And a wonderful memoir it is. Shainberg links several story lines... his adolescence, his relationship with Kyudo Roshi, his experience with other teachers, the story of the Buddha, classical kong-ans (in particular a wonderful treatment of the monks-wind-flag kong-an that drifts through the book to mirror the mind of whatever teacher he is working with) in a complex layering in which each story illuminates the others and the whole rings true. In the sections on Eido, Chang, and Glassman he manages very clear (and to an outsider, apparently dispassionate) descriptions of how teachers go astray and how students not only allow but encourage them to do so. This is no small achievement.

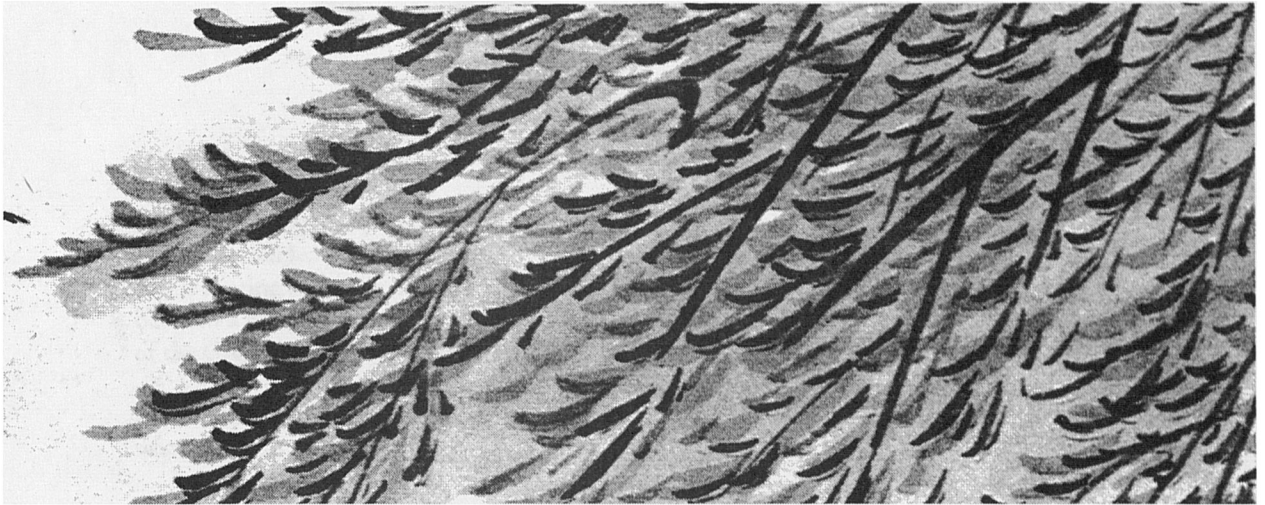
The heart of the book is the presence of Kyudo Roshi. The best way to describe Kyudo Roshi is to say "Soen Sa Nim." Not Dae Soen Sa Nim, but Soen Sa Nim, as those lucky enough to know

him in his first ten years or so in this country knew him, the Soen Sa Nim of the letters we read after practice, with his pidgin yet eloquent English (which his students unconsciously echo), his ceaseless involvement in his students' lives, his insistence on no-bullshit, his cultural insouciance, his attraction to popular culture (Kyudo is passionate about about baseball, Zen Master Seung Sahn about action movies), his pointing always to practice and truth. Kyudo had a small center in Jerusalem, very small, at most thirty students in good times, two in bad, but word had gotten around and Shainberg visited. Eventually Kyudo moved to New York where he continued his pattern from Jerusalem of few students and total involvement with them. Shainberg's karma for knowing important people is somewhat astonishing. At one point he hung out with Samuel Beckett and pulled away from Kyudo as if there was a conflict between these two parallel integrities, but the connection with Kyudo is strong and true. It cannot be sustained. Kyudo is called to what we realize was his destiny all along, back to Japan to head one of the leading Rinzai monasteries, and when Shainberg gets to visit him it is a Great Man he visits. The Zen Master who insisted on cleaning his own toilets now has people smoothing his way and probably is no longer even allowed to wash his own rice bowl.

I was sent this book by one of several friends I have who are themselves ambivalent about Zen: they practice, they don't practice, they sit on their own, they occasionally visit a teacher but it doesn't take. I am writing these words as a guest in the house of friends who are interested and puzzled about practice (and will leave the book with them as a gift.) I cannot imagine a better gift to those of our friends and family who want to know what Buddhist practice feels like.

Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Lessons in Living a Life That Matters by Bernard Glassman and Rick Fields. Bell Tower, New York. Reviewed by Tony Somlai.

As American Zen Buddhism grows out of its infancy, Bernard Glassman, with the writing assistance of Rick Fields, may be providing a blueprint for the future. Bernard Glassman, is a highly



respected Zen teacher currently riding a wave of notoriety in Zen circles. His work with homeless people, the development of the famous Greystone Bakery, and his current response of providing hospice for people living with AIDS has become legendary. This mixture of accomplished writer, Rick Fields, and renowned Zen teacher, Bernie Glassman, should provide a book filled with dharma energy.

I have a basic bias, a certain expectation of receiving a Zen hit that ultimately points to the big question of “What am I?” Whether it’s through a century-old story, a personal recollection, biography, or a sudden event, a Zen book should hit something within the reader, deepen their practice, open the wisdom eye, push—shove—or smack us towards our true nature. Instead, many Zen books read like a travelogue. This is my major criticism of *Instructions to the Cook*.

The book doesn’t engage the reader with the immediacy of the lessons learned as a cook. There is a lack of richness and texture, as if recipes for living were a diagnostic prescription, a grocery list rather than the robust meal promised. *Instructions to the Cook* invites us to a “supreme meal” but many times fails to provide the smells, aroma, taste, touch, that prepare us to eat.

Glassman Roshi asks the reader to use the ingredients life provides to cook “the supreme meal” of living this life fully. He guides the reader through the steps of becoming a Zen cook as a metaphor for using the ingredients of life to make the best meal (situation) possible, regardless of how much, or how little, is available at that moment. The templates for these recipes are based on the previous teachings of Zen Master Dogen and include instructions for the spirit, learning, livelihood, social change and community.

Glassman’s teachings for the spirit reflect how things naturally are, the ordinariness in orderliness. By perceiving the naturalness of what is, we learn to let go and accept what arises in daily life.

Glassman sees the next step as a livelihood that sustains the body through physical self-sufficiency, the point of tasting a life in the state of freedom. The book provides the Greystone Bakery as a model for breaking through the previous illusions of learning and livelihood as a static event, and brings an attitude of mind that is

fresh and open. In the early stages of developing the bakery, experts had suggested that they use ready-made bread mixes filled with chemicals. However, they decided to keep their breads natural, without chemicals. The experts had failed to perceive the bakery’s commitment to letting go and learning the lessons that were right in front of them.

Glassman sees spiritual self-sufficiency as the process of forgetting the self, and suggests using it as an agent for social change. This calls for starting where people are. He believes that the sense of community begins to develop through our ability to work together in the preparation of the “supreme meal.” His early relationship with the ice-cream company, Ben and Jerry’s, is provided as an example of developing lasting relationships and dealing with the various offerings received from life. Glassman finishes the training of the Zen cook with: “Things have to be used. We have to live our lives. The meal should be eaten and digested completely.” He points to, “When we really do something completely, nothing is left.”

Instructions to the Cook draws on the experiences and life of a second generation American Zen Master. It provides the reader with a very simple guide in cooking one’s life in a mindful manner. The building blocks provided in this work may be the foundation for an American Zen lineage of compassion. While some of the book’s ingredients were light on specific examples for students not living in or near Zen centers, they certainly provided an enjoyable meal that was easy to digest. There is much value in hearing a Zen Master say, “Zazen is an activity like sleeping, eating drinking, going to the bathroom. If I don’t sit, my stability decreases, and I feel uncentered.” Glassman’s work is a very quick read that I would recommend to any Zen Center or group for consideration as a guide for their future direction. American Zen Centers have had a history of coming to terms with the mix of a lay-style practice and their monastic heritage and traditions. Perhaps Glassman Roshi provides us with some of the insights American Zen Communities will need to consider as they bring their key ingredients of great love, great compassion, and the bodhisattva way to future meals that are completely alive in helping all beings.