

**Interview with Ed Brown**, one of the leading Zen priests and a student of the founder Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who in the sixties brought Zen to the U.S. and wrote the famous bestseller "Zen Mind – Beginner's Mind".

**About the founding of Tassajara:** Founded in 1966 as a meditation community, it was a hot springs resort before that, and is the first Zen monastery in the U.S.

The spiritual founder was Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. Another person who also played a very important role was Dirk Baker, a charismatic money raiser and organizer. Baker, who had been installed in a ceremony by Suzuki Roshi in person shortly prior to his death, then became Suzuki's successor, but concentrated more on management. As many students and teachers primarily wanted to live a spiritual life and were looking for a spiritual leader, he was criticized for his Western management style and way of life (e.g. driving a BMW). Suzuki's founding mission for Tassajara had been to give as many people in the U.S. as possible the opportunity to study Zen, and to create a sound permanent meditation center.

**About Ed Brown:** Ed Brown left college in 1964 at the age of 20, where he had already been fascinated by Asian wisdom teachings, and became a student of Suzuki. He started out in the kitchen at Tassajara, but, owing to his cooking artistry, soon became cook. He spent only three weeks in Japan. Suzuki had soon discovered that, due to the great cultural differences and the language barrier, it was not good for most of his American students to be sent to study Zen in Japan. Brown considers himself more a priest than a monk. It was at Tassajara where he first met his wife-to-be, with whom he has one daughter. He has devoted all his life to the study and practice of Zen.

**A life exclusively for Zen? Was that meaningful?** He came to Tassajara with the typical feelings of doubt and forlornness, and there found to himself – he calls it "reparenting".

**Is all that pain in the typical Zen sitting posture, the Lotus posture, really necessary for the spiritual experience?** It took even him 10 years to find a fairly suitable sitting posture for himself. Sometimes he had the feeling that so much pain just had to be good for his spiritual development, and that he would be rewarded with a strong light at the end of the tunnel. But maybe there will be no light and the pain will go on and on incessantly. Therefore he discovered for himself that sometimes it is better to simply move the leg that hurts. And as he sees it, it is much more gratifying to tell other people so than to talk them into believing that the suffering is necessary. In his view, the key is rather to reach the right intensity of pain so that, while still feeling oneself and being awake, one will not be completely blocked by it.

**On human greed and susceptibility to temptation:** We human beings are constantly chasing after more of some things (money, sex, status, power) while wishing to get less of some other things (sorrow, grief, annoyance, disappointment). This is the pattern of desire that is driving many people.

**On female Zen priests in Tassajara:** The decision to also admit women to the study of Zen was taken by the two founders right at the beginning, and in doing so they upset a tradition that had been valid for thousands of years. But given the need to raise substantial funds for the purchase of Tassajara, it was clear what this meant in the U.S.: no women – no Tassajara. Bathing together, a practice that was customary at first, was then stopped by Suzuki, and the problems of too intensive sexual activities among students were solved pragmatically through hard work, thus leaving neither time nor energy for excesses.

**On the future:** Tassajara has the right size and is completely established. The trend therefore is to not let it grow any further, but rather, to train students who will then found

new centers. At Tassajara there are monks, priests (they can be married and lead a profane life), students who stay there for several years to learn about themselves, and summer students who during the summer combine service to the guests (kitchen, household, office, garden) with spiritual practice. For half a year, during the summer season, Tassajara is open to guests attending workshops and closed meditation practices – which on the one hand helps finance the project, and, on the other hand, also secures the center's connection with the outside world.

**How does one become a Zen priest:** In winter there are no guests at Tassajara, and the time is devoted to spiritual work only. In order to be accepted as a permanent student, one must either do work for one or two years, or present letters of recommendations from teachers of other centers. There is not entrance examination like in Japan, where in some monasteries students are made to kneel for hours on the wooden floor before being admitted in order to test their seriousness. However, there is a closed five-day meditation practice during which students meditate for five days straight – except only for the time allowed for sleeping - only on their seats, which can become quite challenging.

**Who should come to Tassajara:** Ed is pleased with everyone who comes to Tassajara to find out something about himself or his life – but he also wishes that those who never come will find something in their lives that will open their hearts – this can be family, job, hospice work, or whatever.

**On Zen and death:** Zen does not believe in concrete reincarnation as much as does Tibetan Buddhism. Rather, it holds that if you have learnt all your life to live the instant you will also know exactly what to do in the face of death.

**The author's personal comments on Tassajara:** It is not a place that captures you from the first moment, as does Esalen, for instance. Tassajara acts on you slowly. The constant murmur of flowing water, the baths, the hard, cold wooden floor in the Shendo (meditation hall) and the friendly people, who greet one another with the Buddhist bow, and guests with a heartfelt "Hi". What strikes you with all the priests and students is their bolt-upright posture. Posture comes before meditation. The organization of the center is excellent, everything starts on the dot and is announced by strokes of the clock or a drum, from morning meditation at 5:45 a.m. to breakfast and then to dinner at 7 p.m. sharp. During the night there are only kerosene lamps, bringing back to you the feeling for night and darkness. Once you begin to explore the vicinity of Tassajara, you will find yourself in a unique wilderness and a landscape of singular scenic beauty. The "Yoga and Meditation" workshop, which I booked, is normally booked out already months in advance, above all sleeping accommodation is in great demand at Tassajara and thus scarce, because most visitors who were there once come back again and again. 90% of the participants are women, with a very high Jewish percentage, most of who meditate regularly and practice Yoga. Tassajara is actually a very womanly place. Many sacrifice one week of their vacation, which in the U.S. is very short, for their stay at Tassajara. It is not a place where superficial wisdoms are taught. The first meditation practice early in the morning at 5:45, which after all goes on for more than one hour, is not preceded by any instruction, and visitors and priests meditate together. Guests who ask whether or not they did it correctly and what would be the right way, get an affectionately ironic answer to the effect that there is no such thing as the right way, and that any formula that might be put forward would only give rise to wrong expectations. One of the main objectives of the very rigorous sitting posture is to concentrate on outer form and not to give so much way to one's thoughts. By the way, Zen is not, as many believe, the ability to think of nothing, but the ability to prevent one's thoughts from taking hold of one's mind and will.