

AN AMERICAN ZEN BUDDHIST

"The unearthly silence of the monastery's tremendous pine and cedar trees took hold of me," says the thin, gray-haired monk, explaining one reason he returned to Japan to live Zen.

The monk is Philip Kap-leau, a balding ex-businessman of 53, who probably knows more about the actual practice of Zen Buddhism than any other living westerner.

Twelve years ago, Kap-leau, ridden with ulcers and allergies and haunted by dark and uncertain fears, gave up his New York business, his apartment, his art collection and his automobile and came here to enter a Zen monastery.

Today Americans and Europeans from all walks of life, including a few artists, psychiatrists and physicians, seek him out and consult with him on how to practice the Zen discipline.

After years of rigorous training in two leading Zen monasteries as a lay monk, under three of Japan's out-

standing Zen masters, Kap-leau considers himself a much happier man because of the experience.

Connecticut-born, Kap-leau studied law and became a court reporter. He was chief reporter for the international military tribunal at Nuremberg at the end of world war II and also a staff-member at crime trials in Tokyo.

While in Tokyo, he visited the 13th century Engakuji Zen monastery in nearby Kamakura, and it was there he experienced the unearthly silence of the pines.

After returning to the U.S., Kap-leau organized his own court reporting company and at the same time began his search for the meaning of Zen under the Japanese scholar Daisetsu Suzuki at Columbia university in New York.

But after two years of Suzuki's lectures, Kap-leau felt that Zen "philosophy" was not ridding him of frustration. He described it as "a nagging feeling of nothingness."

The clue that changed his life came from a Japanese acquaintance, a psychiatrist familiar with Zen, who told him:

"Zen's not a philosophy. It's a healthy way to live. If you go to Japan to practice Buddhism and not just talk about it, your whole life will be transformed."

A few months later, Kapleau found himself cross-legged in a Zen monastery, tortured by pain in his legs and back from hours of "sitting Zen." Shivering in the December air of an open, unheated hall, he began wondering if he had made a mistake.

But he stuck it out for three years as a lay monk, first at a well known monastery perched among cedars, pines and bamboo overlooking a valley near Tokyo, later at another monastery near the Japan sea.

His day began at 4 a.m. with meditation for an hour and a half, then chanting of "sutras" for half an hour. There was a breakfast of rice and vegetables, manual labor, and trudging through snow in straw sandals with fellow apprentice monks to

beg for rice. But mostly he was "sitting, sitting" on a flat cushion on the straw-matted floor.

In the heat of summer, Kapleau was there with the monks felling trees, planting rice, cultivating the monastery gardens and working in the kitchen. He still suffered searing pain in his knees and back from the sitting.

All through this discipline, he was hoping to achieve "Satori", a state of "spiritual awakening" marked by great joy and inner peace which has been the aim of Zen monks for centuries.

His stomach condition improved and every one of his allergies disappeared. "The dark fears which formerly haunted me as well as my dreams and hopes, all these have withered away leaving me with a clearer sense of the real," he wrote. But satori did not come.

Kapleau moved on to Kamakura to become a disciple of one of Japan's most highly reputed Zen masters, Hakuun Yasutani.

He began the study of "koans" — baffling spiritual problems presented by the Zen master, or "roshi." One

of the best known of these is "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

But it wasn't until five years later, in 1958, at one of his periodic meetings or "Zen interviews," with Yasutani that Kapleau experienced satori.

As Kapleau describes it, "every single thing disappeared in a dazzling stream of illumination, and I felt myself bathed in a delicious unspeakable delight. . ."

This all sounds more than a little mysterious to one who hasn't experienced it. But Kapleau has now written a book — "The Three Pillars of Zen" — which he hopes will reveal Zen as "an eminently straightforward and practical teaching."

It is, he says, a "unique system of body-mind training whose aim is spiritual enlightenment."

Despite his association with Suzuki, who has done much to popularize Zen through scores of publications and translations, Kapleau feels that the venerated scholar has misled many into believing that Zen is a philosophy to be studied, rather than a living religion to be practised.

In Kapleau's opinion, one of the key aspects of Zen discipline which Suzuki and other commentators on Zen have almost neglected to mention is "Zazen," an exercise in concentration whereby the mind is both tranquilized and sharpened. One aspect of Zazen is the art of sitting in the difficult, cross-legged "lotus" position.

On the lowest level, he believes that Zen discipline can overcome the tensions of modern life and help a man to think more clearly and live a healthier life. On the highest level, he believes that Zen can bring inner peace and moral certainty by teaching "The unity of all existence."

Kapleau's old master, Yasutani, who at 80 has more energy than most men half his age, has set out for the United States, where he has been invited by various groups to teach Zen "more or less permanently."

Kapleau believes that the "Zen fad" that has arisen in many parts of the United States has been "little more than a mind-tickling diversion of high-brows and a plaything of beatniks."