

II

THE CENTER OF EXISTENCE

From the canyon floor to the Quiet Place, the trail is steep in spots. Winded from the climb, we stand in the shade of a small live oak and catch our breath. This is an unassuming place, a small, shaded clearing on the side of a dry, chaparral-covered ridge. To ordinary eyes it is hardly more than a pause on the path before continuing on over the crest of the hill to find what may be waiting on the other side. But this is the place my zen master felt was the right environment in which to settle down forever. Actually, only part of Suzuki Roshi's ashes rest here at Tassajara. Some were sent back to his temples and family in Japan. And some were scattered to the pure winds that circle the earth.

We have no urge to speak or think. Our minds are relaxed and our bodies free to move in any direction. After our breath settles down to its normal rhythm, we lean our walking sticks against the tree. I put my hands together and bow in the direction of the natural *stupa* (memorial stone). The stone is two tons of unmarked, untiered, massive composure. I circle the *stupa* clockwise as Buddhists are trained to do. Jack circles it counterclockwise as he is moved to do. Jack is not a Buddhist. He doesn't practice zen. He never knew Suzuki Roshi during

my zen master's last life on earth. But it is difficult to live with one of Roshi's disciples without becoming intimately aware of, and moved by, the living spirit of that remarkable man.

An animal has knocked over the vase on the altar stone. I set it upright. Jack has found a bamboo rake and is raking the ground in front of the *stupa*. When he is satisfied, he wanders off up the trail.

I find a can of incense sticks and put two short pieces in the niches of the small bronze bowl. I light them. The smell of pine mingles with the smell of manzanita and wild lilac. I step back and feel my body bowing to the ground. I feel my forehead touch the earth. In the distance the deep toll of the temple bell calling the monks to midday service awakens something (someone?) deep within me. The boundaries between myself and my environment dissolve. . . .

It is not I but a black-robed monk who rises from the ground. It is not the bell but the earth that tolls. Everything is shifting. Now it is not a monk but the *stupa* that bows. Now a walking stick rises and bows again. Another walking stick returns with wild flowers and puts them in the vase. The *stupa* asks, "Are you ready?" The walking stick answers, "Yes." Two sticks of burning incense move down the trail that connects the Quiet Place with their new life.

A zen monastery is a particularly favorable environment to find oneself, to free oneself from attachments to old images and habits, to disrupt the routines of our old hometown, and to bring oneself closer to the true center of our physical-mental-spiritual environment. Suzuki Roshi was very careful to select just the right environment for intensive zen-centering. Roshi told me that when he was looking for a monastery site, many people tried to interest him in property on the tops of mountains—places that had majestic views. Most people thought this kind of setting would be ideal for zen meditation. But Roshi said that in practicing zen it was better not to be able to see too far. This is one reason he chose a canyon site. The

physical geography of Tassajara, California, where Zenshinji Monastery is located, encourages zen students to turn their attention inward.

For a hundred years before it became a zen monastery, Tassajara Springs had been a famous old health spa. The name Tassajara is from the Spanish word *tasajera*, meaning meat-drying place—which undoubtedly refers to its American Indian and pioneer heritage. But if we translate the Spanish name phonetically into a Japanese near-equivalent, *taza-hara*, we might come closer to the awakened spirit of this particular environment. *Taza-hara* means to sit in the posture of *zazen* in the center of existence. *Taza* means to do *zazen* wholeheartedly. *Hara* is the abdominal center of the body, as well as the center of the whole zen environment.

The dirt road leading to Tassajara is narrow, steep, and winding. In summer it is dusty, and in winter it is frequently blocked by snow and rock slides. The road begins in the fertile valley of Carmel and ends in the most inaccessible parts of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Tassajara was my zen womb. During the two years that I lived at the monastery, the high rocky walls of the canyon formed the pelvic bones of my zen environment, the monks and priests its soft uterine lining, the monastic schedule the strong uterine muscle, the beat of the great drum in the meditation hall the rhythm of its heart-mind, and the cascading song of the canyon wren the hint of other awakenings.

In the womb one dies to an old life. Old images and old attachments gradually, or suddenly, fall away. The ego experiences this period as a loss. Zen liberation is not a liberation of the self, but *from* the self. And so the return to the womb of the zen environment becomes a mixture of loss and gain, hope and despair. It is a period of intensified frustration between what-is and what-we-wish-it-was.

When I met my second zen master, Ryosen Tatsugami Roshi, I had been living at Tassajara for about a year and was

growing dissatisfied with my zen progress. I didn't realize it then, but this was one sign that I was ripe for the second stage of zen practice. I was unconsciously looking for another zen master to help me through this phase.

Tatsugami Roshi was, I would estimate, in his middle sixties when he came to America at the invitation of Suzuki Roshi to lead two training periods at Tassajara. Besides being abbot of his own Zen Buddhist temple complex in Japan, Tatsugami Roshi had been, for twelve years, head training monk at Eihoji, the largest Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan. He had an imposing physical appearance and a virile personality. In his younger days he had been a champion *sumo* wrestler.

After a couple of months of watching Tatsugami Roshi from a distance, I told Suzuki Roshi that I felt moved to ask him if I could become his disciple. Suzuki Roshi encouraged me. So, on my forty-seventh birthday, I proposed this idea to Tatsugami Roshi, and he answered without hesitation (through an interpreter as he didn't speak English): "Since it is your birthday, I cannot refuse."

This was in March. Tatsugami Roshi planned to spend the summer months in Japan, returning to Tassajara in the fall for the winter training period. Before he left he announced to me that, when he returned, he would bring my robes so that I could be ordained. (At that moment I caught sight of the top of the mountain.) Then he wanted me to go to San Francisco to study the Japanese language in preparation for entering a Japanese Zen Buddhist nunnery. (At that moment I felt myself plunging to the bottom of the mountain.)

I had become attached to Tassajara—not to the monastic life or to the zen community, but to the canyon itself. The summer before, I had talked to Suzuki Roshi about my plan to stay at Tassajara until I felt some inner movement to leave—and Suzuki Roshi had approved. I knew I wasn't ready to leave the canyon yet.

I tried to picture the life Tatsugami Roshi had in mind for me. The thought of the years it would take me to learn every-

day conversation in the Japanese language depressed me. And I was certain that one lifetime was not enough for someone as stupid as I was to master the technical language of Zen Buddhism in Japanese. I don't have a scholarly mind. I don't have a good memory or a talent for languages in general.

Tatsugami Roshi didn't speak English. As far as I was concerned, this wasn't a handicap. Rather, it seemed to me that because of the language barrier, he was forced to find more direct ways to reach out to his American zen students. And they were forced to find more direct ways to reach out to him.

I thought to myself: Words aren't zen. Zen transcends words. Zen is communicated directly, from heart to heart. Sometimes zen *seems* to be transmitted by words, but actually the real message lies behind the spoken words or between the lines of the written words.

The thought of doing time in a Japanese nunnery was also depressing to me. To me, a Japanese nunnery represented a submission of the female spirit to the male chauvinist religious tradition. Although Buddhist scriptures have always proclaimed that there is no difference between the Buddha-nature of a man or a woman, in practice (I had heard on excellent authority) Japanese nuns have too often been treated like second-class Buddhas.

But the most depressing thought of all was the waste of precious time it would take to complete the program Tatsugami Roshi had outlined for me. I didn't have that much time! Very early in my zen practice I had taken a vow to save all sentient beings (not just fellow humans). This vow is one of the four great vows handed down from Buddha to his followers. Buddhists normally take, and act upon, this vow consciously by helping others and doing good works. But in my case, the first time I encountered the vow in my study of Buddhism, I felt possessed by it. It was as if I had taken the vow in some other life and had forgotten it in this life. Then suddenly I was reminded of it once again. The vow is a mystery because it appears to be an impossibility. But still I felt I had to try.

I decided then that the only way I could accomplish such a monumental and unreasonable task was to break it down into something I might conceivably be able to handle in one lifetime. I figured if I could save one hundred sentient beings, and if each one of them saved one hundred, and so on, and so on, eventually all sentient beings would be saved.

I had no idea what saving sentient beings meant. I was quite sure that salvation in Buddhism was different from what Christians understood it to be. I left that problem to be solved later. The only thing I could do at that time was to throw myself into the practice of zen. When I did this the vow sank into the background, and I wasn't troubled by it consciously. But suddenly it had come back to haunt me. And I realized that I didn't have all the time in the world. In order to save one hundred sentient beings I would first have to speed up the process of saving myself. (By this time I had learned that no one else was going to save me.) But how could I save myself if I hadn't even found myself? And if I couldn't find myself here at Tassajara, how could I expect to find myself in a Japanese nunnery?

After the initial shock I plunged into a deep depression. But a few days later I rallied enough strength to carry on with the everyday activities of monastic life. I had a position of responsibility at the monastery then which was rather demanding. But the problem in my mind was demanding too. I found it harder and harder to give my work my whole attention. I experienced lapses of mental activity, times when my mind went totally blank and I couldn't connect with my normal, everyday memory bank. It was as if something in my mind was overloaded and was shorting out the habitual mental circuits.

Then another trivial incident—this time involving an American Zen Buddhist priest who insisted that I assume some extra duties—"blew a master fuse." I collapsed in bed the next day, physically and mentally exhausted.

For months I remained in my room at the monastery. Everyone had a different opinion as to what was wrong with

me. The deep-rooted conflict became so frustrating that I even stopped talking. If I had been living in a more conventional environment, or if I hadn't had a firm background of zen practice, I might have allowed myself to be put into a mental hospital where I would probably have been treated with drugs. The "civilized" or scientific response toward problems such as I was having often seems to be: Do something about it. The natural, or zen, response is more often: Observe it uncritically. Let it come in and let it go out. Don't cling to it.

In retrospect, I believe my zen illness was caused by a kind of metaphysical impasse for which there was only one zen prescription: Metaphysician, heal thyself. Because of my excellent treatment at Tassajara—which was limited to providing me with meals in my room and occasional visitors, but otherwise letting me take care of my own illness—I was able to abandon myself to my mental breakdown and concentrate on what was going on, rather than worrying about it.

Looking back, I can see that what was going on was—as it is called in zen—the great doubt. Great doubt is the literal translation of a zen expression that is actually a kind of mental fixation. It is an intense, involuntary concentration on some inner problem or conflict. For years I had been fascinated and troubled by the problem of self. "Who am I?" The search for the original self, the source of the vow to save all sentient beings, was always in the background of my meditation. Now I had slipped into the center of that original self.

I had known intellectually that to find myself would be to lose myself. But I hadn't realized how attached I had become to my old self, and how disturbing it would be to lose it. Actually, I hadn't lost my old self: I had only lost my *image* of my old self. In place of that comfortable old image was nothing but—how can I describe it? A Vast Emptiness? An ancient power? A not-self? Even now I have trouble finding words to express the nature of the power that possessed me.

There is another zen term, "family shame," that might help to shed a little more light on the experience. Family shame

means a zen secret that can't be talked about—not because the participants are sworn to secrecy, or because they are ashamed to talk about it or afraid to talk about it, but because it is almost impossible to talk about it. I found the experience impossible to talk about because I was entering the second phase of zen development.

I have pointed out that it is traditional to have three zen masters, each one representing a different phase of zen growth. Nuzuki Roshi guided me during my Zen Buddhist childhood. Tutsugami Roshi introduced me to my Zen Buddhist adolescence.

The second zen master can be likened to a spiritual rival. A challenger. A tester. He encourages the student to come to grips with his self. Or, as it is sometimes expressed in zen, to lock eyebrows with himself. The encounter with our second zen master may resemble a battle rather than a duel because it usually involves other members of the zen family.

At the least, this adolescent zen phase is upsetting. The newly acquired Zen Buddhist conditioning reaches the stage where it has become as strong as the zen student's previous social and religious conditioning. The two ways of seeing life are at war with each other. At this point a zen student may drop out of zen training completely (because it has become too mentally disturbing). He may take up some other spiritual path. Or, on the other hand, the zen student may give up his previous conditioning completely and throw himself obediently at the feet of his zen master.

At the best, this adolescent zen phase is revolutionary, and not just to the individual personalities directly involved. If this battle is fought wholeheartedly, between a great zen master and a great zen student, it can revolutionize the whole zen environment. The zen master and the zen student both change.

And since, from the Buddhist point of view, everything in the universe is interconnected, this change has far-reaching effects. For instance, the effect of the clash between Bodhid-

harma, the first Zen Buddhist patriarch of China, and his disciple Eka was the beginning of a revolution (or evolution) of Buddhist beliefs in China. It profoundly affected the whole social and literary fabric of Chinese and Japanese life.

On a smaller scale: If I hadn't locked eyebrows with Tatsugami Roshi, this book would never have been written, and you wouldn't be reading it now. If this book leads you to explore the zen environment more directly, it may revolutionize your life and have a profound effect on everything you do. Even if I don't accomplish my vow to save all sentient beings in this life, someone who reads this book may find a way.

This might be a good place for us to take a break. If you are just beginning your study of zen, I've probably stirred up a few disturbing doubts in your mind by now.

Jack and I are back in Big Sur. We're planning a picnic for tomorrow. After a pleasant day in natural surroundings, our minds should be relaxed enough to make it easier to push through this next chapter.