# PART ONE

# EXPLORING THE ZEN ENVIRONMENT

# NOTE

Please refer to the glossary for definitions of foreign words and Buddhist technical terms, as well as details about historical persons and places mentioned in the text. To make reading easier, diacritical marks on foreign words have been restricted to the glossary. Sources of quotations can be found in the notes section.

# 1

# MY OLD HOMETOWN

We're on the road again. Living in our only permanent home, a tiny trailer I call Samsara (Wanderer). Sometimes we are amazed that two people can live in such a small space. But space, as well as time, is relative. Meditation, as the Indian lay Buddhist philosopher Vimalakirti demonstrated, can expand even a ten-foot-square room into infinite proportions.

Today we may make our home in this Pacific valley, sheltered from the shifting winds of fortune, but tomorrow we may be blown along like a cloud in the sky, or whirled about like a bubble in a stream. So we might as well enjoy this place now. It's all we have.

We've been here before. And yet this is the first time we've been here. Since everything is changing, everything is always fresh and new. This is the beginning of a new zen day. The dew sparkles on each leaf and every blade of grass. It is quiet and peaceful here. The campground is spacious, and since it is off-season we have the place almost to ourselves. The noise of the traffic on the Coast Highway is muffled by a screen of tall cypress trees. From our campsite we can't see the ocean. But it's not far away. Later on we'll walk down to the beach. We

may leave a few footprints in the sand for the incoming tide to wash away.

We drink our second cup of coffee outside, sitting at the picnic table under a tree blooming with yellow flowers. The sun rises over the mountain behind us, warming the air. A few orange and black butterflies begin to stir. Within an hour, hundreds of them are fluttering around the tree, feeding on the yellow blossoms, resting on the green leaves, and coupling on the edges of our empty coffee cups.

Once I dreamt that I was a butterfly called Emptiness. Now I dream that I am a woman called Marian. In this dream I am married to a man called Jack. We live in a fantasy called Big Sur; it's part of an imaginary state called California that exists for a moment in a vision called America, on an illusion called Earth, in a science fiction plot called the Solar System, in a beautiful theory called the Milky Way, and floats in a zen environment called Vast Emptiness.

In this dream Jack and I call ourselves Big Sur caretakers. Since caretaking positions don't always provide a house to live in, we find it convenient to take our home with us like hermit crabs. Caretaking seldom provides an income either, so we find it necessary to pick up odd jobs to fill the tank of our truck and stock the shelves of our trailer. My traveling companion in this life is a Jack-of-all-trades. I am a master of none. At the present moment we are between caretaking jobs, waiting for an opening. Big Sur is a beautiful environment, so there are always more caretakers than places to take care of here. But over the years we've learned to be very patient. Sooner or later we always seem to find the right spot.

A flash of vermilion in the sky sends Jack running to the truck for his binoculars. It's a hang glider. Or is it a butterfly? It doesn't really matter what it is called. Since it is floating into our dream space, it is ours for this moment to enjoy.

Behind the campground there is a dirt road that winds up the mountain to a flat, high above the ocean. Here the butter-

fly-men hurl themselves into emptiness. For a while they realize themselves, and help us realize too, that we are all supported and transported in this dream of life by nothing but emptiness.

Jack hands me the binoculars. Now I can see the young man hanging below his vermilion sail. He looks relaxed. He shifts the weight of his body occasionally so that the craft circles in large spirals, some of them taking him over the ocean. As he nears the ground his circles become smaller. Now he has dropped out of sight behind the cypress trees. He will land on a large field above the beach. After he touches the ground he will run a few feet and then walk across the field to where his friends are waiting for him. His journey of solitude and silence has lasted only twenty minutes, but its effects will linger for several days.

Each of us has our favorite form of meditation. Some meditate when they play golf, some when they jog or ski. I know a man who meditates when he builds rock walls, and a woman who meditates when she sews. Jack meditates whenever he gets under the hood of his truck. Zen masters meditate when they sit, or stand, or walk, or lie down, or eat, or go to the bathroom. Some people have never forgotten how to meditate. Others have to be taught, or reminded, how to meditate. Without some form of meditation this dream called life becomes a nightmare. Meditation reconnects us with the zen environment which the first zen patriarch, Bodhidharma, called Vast Emptiness.

Jack asks me if I would like to walk down to the field with him to the place where the hang-glider families are gathered around their bright-colored sails. I have some letters to write, so I resist the tempting invitation. There is one letter in particular that I have been putting off writing. I *should* write to my mother. In her last letter to me she asked me this question: "When are you going to settle down?"

This isn't an easy question to answer. I thought of writing

my mother that living in Samsara is like living in *nirvana*. But then I would have had to write a book to try to explain to my mother what I meant.

*Samsara* is the wandering life; *samsara* is the wandering mind. Wandering is the Buddhist way of expressing our ordinary life and our ordinary mind. *Nirvana*—well, strictly speaking, it is the same as *samsara*. Before enlightenment, we are convinced that *nirvana* is the opposite of *samsara*. After enlightenment we realize *nirvana* is the same as *samsara*, and enlightened life is the same as ordinary life.

Maybe it would help to clarify the seeming difference (but actual identity) of the states of *nirvana* and *samsara* (the enlightened life-mind and the ordinary life-mind) if we consider another Buddhist term that is sometimes used as a synonym for *nirvana* but can also be used as a synonym for *samsara*. The Sanskrit word *apratistha* literally means, according to the late Zen Buddhist scholar, D. T. Suzuki, "not to have any home where one may settle down." Actually, D. T. Suzuki says that *apratistha* means "to settle down where there is no settling down." Not to have any home where one may settle down—that may seem terrible. But to settle down where there is no settling down—that may be wonderful.

*Samsara* and *nirvana*. They are almost the same, but not exactly. D. T. Suzuki translated a verse from a Japanese book of swordsmanship which expresses this attitude better than I could in words:

> *Wherever and whenever the mind is found*
> *attached to anything*
> *Make haste to detach yourself from it.*
> *When you tarry for any length of time*
> *It will turn again into your old hometown.*

It is important to remember that mind, in Zen Buddhism, is not separate from, or dependent upon, the body or the total environment. Our old hometown is not just a place. It is also a

state of mind, our egoistic description of reality, which limits our awareness by tethering it to words, concepts, and reasons.

The great zen patriarch Rinzai described the spirit of *apratistha* as the Man of No Title, who, he said, "is the one who is in the house and yet does not stay away from the road; he is the one who is on the road and yet does not stay away from the house. Is he an ordinary man or a great sage? No one can tell. Even the Devil does not know where to locate him. Even the Buddha fails to manage him as he may desire. When we try to point him out, he is no more there; he is on the other side of the mountain."

It might be easier for my mother to accept my unsettled life-style if I were a young woman. But I'm not. I'm middle-aged, with grown children of my own. Before I took up the practice of zen I *was* settled down (or so I thought), living in a pleasant middle-class neighborhood in a small suburban town near San Francisco. I was divorced. I had a part-time career. I owned a comfortable home, had a good income, plenty of freedom, good health, intelligent children, and interesting friends. But for some unknown reason I felt dissatisfied. I had the feeling that something was missing from my life.

I began searching for the cause of my unreasonable dissatisfaction. It was during this search that I signed up for a weekend seminar on meditation at Esalen Institute in Big Sur. Esalen is often described as the home of the human-potential movement. But for me Esalen will always be the home of Buddhism. Esalen is a place where trees and people miraculously flower out of season. It was at Esalen (or was it at the Lumbini Gardens where Buddha was born?) that the Zen Buddhist poet Gary Snyder taught me how to practice *zazen* (sitting meditation). It was there I got my first taste of zen. I've tried over and over, and failed again and again, to describe the impact of that first zen experience. One of these days I'll go back to Esalen and then I may be able to recapture some of the spirit of that original experience.

Meanwhile, back in my old hometown I began dreaming of going to Japan (after my children were grown) where I would find my own zen master—someone who would liberate me. Every morning I practiced *zazen* so that I'd be prepared for the appearance of my zen master. ( I had read somewhere that when the zen student is ready, the zen master will appear.)

Three months later I was drinking a second cup of coffee and skimming through the morning paper when a word jumped off the religious page. I stopped and read the short announcement:

ZEN CLASS TO BEGIN

> Next Thursday morning at 5:45 a.m. the Reverend Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, head priest of Sokoji Zen Buddhist Temple in San Francisco, will start a weekly class in zen meditation.

The address was in Palo Alto, just a short drive from my Los Altos home. I was amazed. I had no idea that there was a Japanese zen master with a temple in San Francisco. Why had no one at the Esalen seminar told me about Suzuki Roshi? Maybe they assumed I knew about him. Maybe I wasn't ready to meet my zen master then. Was I ready now?

Thursday morning. A tree-lined street in Palo Alto. A yellow porch light on one of the old two-story houses was the only sign of life. I found a note thumbtacked to the front door.

THE DOOR IS OPEN. PLEASE COME IN.

In the dim light of the hall I could see a pile of coats and bags on a long bench. There was a row of shoes on the floor. After taking off my coat and shoes, I stepped through the French doors into the living room. I smelled incense. Pine. There were eight or ten people sitting on black cushions in the middle of the room. I spotted an empty cushion, sat down on

it, crossed my legs (or more specifically my ankles as my legs were still too stiff to twist into a half-lotus position), and began staring at the pattern in the oriental rug. I head the rustle of silk robes. Someone was standing behind me. . . .

Suzuki Roshi did nothing more than straighten my back and arrange my hands in the right position for *zazen*. Still, I felt something in his total attention that first zen morning that carried me back beyond my earliest recollection. What was it? Love? Great compassion? Then I realized. It was total acceptance. I was a stranger, a new student, awkward and ignorant. Yet I felt that Suzuki Roshi had accepted me as wholeheartedly and uncritically as a mother accepts her newborn child.

After *zazen* Suzuki Roshi led a simplified version of the service he had developed for his American congregation at Zen Center in San Francisco. Then he lectured informally and answered questions. While he was talking I had a chance to observe his appearance and manner. Like many Japanese men Roshi was short and small-boned. He was sixty-one at that time, but his face was smooth and almost unlined. If his head hadn't been shaved he might have appeared to be no older than fifty. Roshi had lively brown eyes and a perky nose. His voice was soft and his laugh a delightful chuckle. All of his movements were as graceful and as unself-conscious as a cat's. I knew I had found my first zen master.

It is traditional in zen training to have three zen masters. Each one represents one phase, more or less, of zen growth. This isn't a rigid rule. Sometimes, as in the case of Suzuki Roshi's successor Zentatsu Baker Roshi, one zen master sees a zen student through all three phases of zen development. There are more than three phases, but I don't intend to talk about the advanced stages of traditional Zen Buddhism in this book.

The first zen master may be likened to a spiritual parent who encourages the student to leave his "old hometown" (his rigid way of viewing life). The relationship of Buddha to his disciples, the relationship of a parent to a child, is a good ex-

ample of the ideal first phase of zen. The relationship between Suzuki Roshi and myself followed the classic pattern.

One morning after meditation class I invited Suzuki Roshi to come to my home for breakfast before driving him back to his temple in San Francisco. As soon as he walked into the entrance hall of my home he stopped. "Oh, what a bee-oo-tiful *big* living room," he sighed. Though the thought had never entered my mind until that moment, I knew immediately what was in Roshi's mind. He was picturing the room as a *zendo* (meditation room). As we stood at the entrance of the imaginary *zendo,* I began to visualize the black cushions arranged on the grass-green carpet of the room. I could picture Roshi sitting at the end of the room, his brown silk robes set off by the white walls. I could see a Japanese flower arrangement in the alcove above Roshi's head, a fire flickering in the fireplace on cold mornings. . . .

But then my vision was interrupted. I remembered the racket my five teen-age children made getting ready for school. I told Roshi it would never work.

During breakfast Roshi explained to me that he wanted to expand the activities of the zen group. He told me he wasn't worried about my children disturbing the zen students. "Learning to accept the normal noises of one's environment is very good practice for zen students," he said. I thought this over a moment and gave him my answer: "OK. Let's give it a try."

I was hooked. Though nothing formal was ever said, that was the point where I moved from being one of Suzuki Roshi's followers to being one of his disciples. For the next few years Roshi and I worked together like partners, to expand the program of the zen group.

After a few years of zen training under the compassionate and gentle guidance of my first zen master, I began to discover the source of some of my dissatisfaction. It seemed to me that my environment didn't give me the right background to express myself fully. It was an environment in which I could express my parents' image of me, and my children's image of me,

and my friends' image of me, and even my zen master's image of me, but it wasn't a background in which I could express my own image of myself. The problem was that I didn't really know myself. All the images I had of myself were just that—images. In order to find out who I really was—in order to find my real self—it was necessary to allow myself a period of exploration, a period of wandering, a period of *apratistha.* It wasn't that there was anything intrinsically wrong with the environment in which I was living. It's the right environment for some. But my mind had turned the place into my old hometown.

I am convinced now of what I only suspected then—that the right environment is so important in the practice of zen meditation that it should be included in the Middle Way, Buddha's Noble Path of Right Living. Buddha's Old Middle Way contains eight steps: right thought, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. Buddha's New Middle Way would add the step of right environment—right in the middle of the Middle Way—between the steps of right action and right livelihood.

Before I could look for the right environment to find my real self, I first had to get rid of the web of karmic attachments that bound me to my old hometown. The word karmic is an Anglicized adjective form of the Sanskrit word *karma. Karma* is the physical-spiritual law of action and reaction. Karmic reactions are produced by actions that have a motive, actions that seek a result. Purposeful actions create attachments to people, places, things, and ideas. Purposeless actions don't create any future karmic attachments.

Take writing a book, for instance. If the book is written only to make money, or to achieve fame, the writer will create future *karma* for himself—"good" *karma* if the book is a success, or "bad" *karma* if it fails. (Both good and bad *karma* create problems.) But if the book is written for the sake of it-

self, just because the writer is *moved* to write it, it won't matter to him whether it is a success or a failure. The book won't create any future karmic attachments.

During my early years of zen training, under the guidance of Suzuki Roshi, I learned that *zazen* practiced for the sake of itself, and not for the sake of gaining enlightenment or peace of mind, was one of the most effective ways of getting rid of old karmic attachments. I didn't succeed (I still haven't) in eliminating *all* my old *karma*, but I *did* succeed in getting rid of some of my stickiest attachments.

One day, during a private interview, Suzuki Roshi told me he thought I should join the Zen Buddhist order. He wanted me to become ordained, and to wear the Zen Buddhist robes. At first I was shocked and disturbed. I didn't want to consider such a possibility until after all my children were grown and on their own. I still had two teen-agers living at home. I found myself between a rock and a hard place (or, as Buddhists would say, between two iron mountains). I couldn't decide which responsibility was the most important, the one I owed to my children, or the one I owed to that still, small voiceless voice, the "voice" that began urging me to give up everything and follow the path of the Buddha. (Shakyamuni Gautama, later to become the Buddha, left his palace, his subjects, his wife, and his child, to become a homeless wanderer. Buddha wanted to find an environment in which he could settle his mind and solve the problem of human suffering.) After much painful soul-searching I decided to leave home. The question of whether or not to become ordained was a matter I would decide later.

Suzuki Roshi didn't encourage me to leave home, or to give away all my possessions. But when he found that I was determined to do so he reluctantly accepted my decision. He felt troubled by my plan to give my home to the zen group. He tried to talk me out of burning my bridges behind me. But I was stubborn. The gift was made, not entirely out of generosity, but partly from my desire to be free of all ties to my past.

Many of my friends, and some of my family, thought I would regret my decision later. I haven't yet.

This may be a good place to assure you that authentic Zen Buddhist priests never engage in the kind of con games practiced by many American cult leaders. Zen masters do not try to break up marriages or families. They never try to persuade members of their congregations to turn over their homes, cars, or life savings to the organization. Zen masters give their teaching freely. Only voluntary donations of money and time are accepted. Any zen master who engages in questionable cultlike practices isn't really a zen master. He is an imposter.

Eventually I was able to transfer my responsibilities to other capable shoulders. My ex-husband took custody of our two youngest children. Lester Kaye, an outstanding disciple of Suzuki Roshi's, took over my administrative duties for the Los Altos zen group.

When I had reduced my karmic effects to what I thought was the irreducible minimum (three cardboard cartons full), I left home. A friend promised to deliver these boxes to my first stop, which was to be a small cabin in the middle of a zen monastery in the wilderness behind Big Sur, California. On a brilliantly bright day in early spring I walked alone over a snowy mountain pass into my new life—at Tassajara.

Every two or three years, when Jack and I feel we are coming to the end of a period of zen life and are about to begin a new one, we visit the grave of my old zen master to express our appreciation to the spirit that points the way. We feel we are at one of those forks in the path now. So tomorrow we will leave Samsara, our trailer, in Big Sur and drive over the mountains to Tassajara.