

THE HERMIT

After sharing our picnic lunch, each of us is moved to explore a different path. I follow a winding trail through the sagebrush to a bluff overlooking the ocean. Here is a place where some perceptive artist had started to realize a dream. A huge gray boulder, slashed by green serpentine and brilliant white marble, thrusts itself nine feet above the ground. The path winds around the south side of the boulder. On the ocean side of it, the earth has been dug out to expose another third of the massive rock. Nearby are two neat piles of smaller rocks. It's clear that someone with sensitivity and character had planned to build a small house here—long ago, judging by the way the weeds and brush have taken over.

It isn't difficult to finish the house in the imagination, to picture rock walls rising against the bank, a fireplace against the boulder, a cement and pebble floor, rough beam ceilings, slab siding, and a shake roof. Most of the wall on the ocean side would be glass. And there would be a deck extending over the bluff.

To the south the Coast Highway appears and disappears as it winds its way precariously along the ridges and canyons of the Santa Lucia Mountains. To the north only a short section

of road can be seen before it, too, disappears around a bend. Occasionally the sound of a car can be heard above the rhythmic roar of the breakers over a thousand feet below. The ocean is calm. Below, close to the shore, the sea is greenish blue; in the distance it shimmers with brilliant dancing lights. On the horizon the dark sea melts into the paler blue of the sky. A delicate mist clings to the shoreline, softening the sharp edges of the rugged coast. But the sun is well over the mountains to the east, so the mist will soon burn off. Through binoculars, the lighthouse near San Simeon can barely be made out. A few miles south I can see the flat where a hermit lived in a hut with two walls and a roof.

I wonder where the artist who began this rock house is now. Is he still wandering around, trying over and over, and failing again and again, to find a place to build his dream? Or has he given up dreaming and settled down in his old hometown? And what about the hermit? Is the hermit still wandering around, trying over and over, and failing again and again, to find a place to realize a dream? Or was the hermit a dream?

Inner self is something very strange. And powerful. We might call this "self" our karmic core or our karmic nucleus. The quotation marks around self are very important. Even if I don't always put quotation marks around the word self, we shouldn't forget them. They remind us that what we ordinarily think of as our self is not really our self. To speak of inner self, or soul, or spirit suggests something that is too permanent and too substantial. Since the minds of human beings tend to become attached to the idea of permanency and substantiality, Gautama Buddha emphasized the idea of process, rather than substance or matter. We can consider our self from the point of view of some thing or from the point of view of some force or energy.

Actually, neither substance nor process can explain ultimate reality, so it is probably best not to limit it by using any word. It's just "." But then if we don't use some word, we are apt

to overlook it. We might allow our whole life to pass, believing that the limited description of ourself formulated by the collective ego of our time and place is the only true one.

So " " is named in order to help us become more aware of some aspect of its true nature. It may be called zen, or *nirvana*, or Buddha, or Mind, or *tao* (the way), or the Man of No Rank. All these words are only names for that reality which is beyond names and descriptions. One of my zen teachers, Dainin Katagiri Roshi, cautioned his zen students that even if they reached the source of the river they would never be able to understand the totality of the river. In other words, even if we find our self, we still can never understand the totality of our self. But this doesn't mean we shouldn't try. After we find our self, we may spend the rest of our lives trying to name, or describe, or express our self. Even though it is impossible.

Sometimes Suzuki Roshi referred to our self as our inmost request. This may be a very good name for beginning zen students to use because it doesn't frighten the ego as much as some other names are apt to. The ego is not comfortable at first with names like *nirvana*, names that suggest a complete extinction or death of the ego. A *dharma* brother of mine was once so frightened by a sudden awareness of his cosmic connection that he was afraid to continue zen practice. A premature awakening may be viewed by the ego as one of utter loneliness, instead of complete atonement.

When we arrive at the center of our existence, and are confronted with something beyond time, space, and reason, our logical mind breaks down. Sometimes it takes a long period of reintegration before the conscious mind is able to fully absorb and accept the ecological nature of our self.

During this period, I identified strongly with Shakyamuni Buddha. In some inexplicable way I *knew* that I had been the Great Hermit who had taken the original vow to save all sentient beings. And, in an even more inexplicable way, I knew I had also been all the spiritual descendants of Buddha. The whole line of Buddhist patriarchs was not just a succession of

individual Buddhas but was the extended life of One Buddha. Since it isn't easy to live with someone who is suffering from mythic inflation, as I was, the realization that I was Buddha created many problems for my zen family, especially for my zen parents, Suzuki Roshi and Tatsugami Roshi.

Mythic inflation is a temporary and immature stage of spiritual growth. In the story of Buddha's life it appears immediately after Shakyamuni's birth, when the infant Buddha takes seven giant steps, points to the heaven with one hand and the earth with the other hand, and proclaims, "Between heaven and earth I alone am the World-honored One." Suzuki Roshi once pointed out that just being born into this world (or just being conceived) creates problems for ourselves and others, especially for our parents. But Roshi said that eventually these problems should be dissolved.

It isn't the identification with Buddha that is the problem. It's necessary to identify with the mythic nature of our self in order to experience it fully. One of the best definitions of myth I've found is by Marshall McLuhan: "Myth is the instant vision of a complex process that ordinarily extends over a long period." McLuhan explains that: "We *live* mythically but continue to think fragmentarily and on single planes." So we can't avoid direct contact with our original nature without shutting out the greater part of our self. The problem arises only when we become permanently attached to the myth. For we not only live mythically in the zen environment, but we also live here and now in the world of ordinary time and place.

The name I first used to express my innermost self was the Hermit. During the period that the Hermit was expanding my mind, and creating a new attachment to itself, it also pushed the monastic organization uncomfortably out of shape. The Marian problem, as my zen illness was called by some, disrupted the group life of the monastery. As far as the other students could tell, I wasn't physically ill. Naturally many of them

couldn't understand why I was allowed to eat, study, work, and meditate apart from the other students. Since Tatsugami Roshi was in Japan, some of the students must have asked Suzuki Roshi to do something about the situation. But Suzuki Roshi (who was in San Francisco during this period) didn't choose to interfere.

When Tatsugami Roshi returned to Tassajara to lead the winter training session, everyone at the monastery hoped that he would find a quick solution to the Marian problem. But Roshi took his time. Except for one "chance" meeting in which we both just smiled and continued on our way, and one formal interview when I remained silent and Roshi spoke only one word, Tatsugami Roshi and I didn't meet face-to-face. It wasn't until the end of the training period, nine months after he had accepted me as a disciple, that the spiritual obstetrician used his Sword of Wisdom to cut the Hermit out of its zen womb and sever the umbilical cord that tied it to the organized community of Zen Buddhism. At least that's one metaphoric explanation of what happened in my complex inner mythical life. On the surface, in ordinary life, the only thing that happened was that Tatsugami Roshi ordered me to leave Tassajara—and I did.

Was being expelled a punishment for my disobedience, or a natural course of events in zen training? When an infant is forced to leave the womb of its mother it may *feel* like a punishment to the mother and the child, but actually it happens quite naturally. At the time I felt that Roshi's order reflected my own inner readiness to leave. I had finally lost my attachment to my zen womb. (My attachment to the Hermit would take longer to lose.) I was never officially ordained. I never tried on my silk Buddhist robes. It was to be my *karma* to go forth into the homeless state (as Buddhist ordination is described) wearing only my everyday clothes.

Before I move on to the other side of the Santa Lucia Mountains to Big Sur, where my *karma* was to carry me next,

I want to say just a few words about the third phase of zen. I can't speak from personal experience about the third relationship with our self because I'm still not completely ready for it. But it may help us to recognize our third zen master if we think of Maitreya as the ideal teacher for this third phase of zen.

Maitreya is the Buddha to come, the future Buddha, or our innate wisdom-nature waiting to be awakened to full consciousness. It is interesting to me that Maitreya Buddha is not ordained to become a traditional zen priest. It is also interesting that the Sanskrit root of the name Maitreya is friendliness. A real friendship is not an easy thing to experience in this life. According to my understanding of zen, it takes years and years of hard work learning to accept ourselves completely, with all of our imperfections and all of our potentials, before we are ready to accept our own Maitreya Buddha-nature.

I feel that America is the right environment for the development of a more democratic and informal expression of zen. This isn't to suggest that Maitreya Buddhism will, or should, completely replace the older forms of Zen Buddhism. There is plenty of room in America for all kinds of Buddhas to express themselves, from the most traditional to the most iconoclastic. But sooner or later each zen student must decide whether he is called upon to be a follower of past Buddhas or to be a creator of future Buddhas. When I left Tassajara I had made my decision—to follow no one but my “self.”

This afternoon Jack and I are leaving Samsara in the campground at Pacific Valley and will be driving south to Gorda Mountain. We plan to camp out overnight on the property where I lived when I first came to Big Sur.