IV

ON THE BRINK OF *NIRVANA*

Morning crawls languidly out of its sleeping bag. The silence is profound. The only sounds are the flutter of wings as a small field sparrow flies close to the ground past the open end of the tent. There is no other movement. Everything else —grass, flowers, insects, trees, thoughts—is quite still. There are a few ripples on the surface of the ocean, but they are very small and very far away. Quietly and carefully I slip out of the tent, giving my camping partner time to enjoy his dream while I take time to enjoy mine.

Cold creeps through layers of clothing, touching the skin. It penetrates the muscles of the hands, stiffening the fingers so that it is difficult to button and zip. But the cold isn't unpleasant. It's just cold.

Gradually the earth turns. Slowly the morning manifests itself. First the mountains to the north are uncovered, their shadows swept away by the bright glow of the sun. Then color touches the edges of the hills and gullies and meadows until the whole body of the mountain lies gleaming and yawning in the bright beginning of a new day.

A little breeze stirs the grass. The mind moves gently, and the body moves slowly, attending to its morning tasks with as

little thought or effort as the moving of a leaf or petal. The sweet gurgling melody of a bird, whose nest is hidden in the grasses nearby, is accompanied by the tap-tink of kettle and spoon as I heat water for a cup of tea and warm up a can of soup.

I carry my breakfast to a rock which overlooks the three thousand galaxies. But it is not soup that I eat; it's wild flowers, sourgrass, bay leaves, soaring hawks, craggy rocks, a passing freighter-with-two-masts-headed-north, and a red station wagon slowly climbing up the rutty mountain road. It is not tea that I drink; it is the deep blue sea, the clear blue sky, the bright gold sun; everything-I-see-and-hear-and-taste-and-touch-and-smell-and-think at this moment becomes a part of me and I a part of it.

In the bottom of my teacup only a white froth remains. I sip the slightly bitter foam, draining the last offing and more. I drink until I have swallowed the entire ocean and the ocean has swallowed me. Now there is nothing left but the blue Pacific.

In one of his books Carlos Castaneda tells of how his spiritual guide, don Juan, the Yaqui Indian sage, introduced him to the art of finding a beneficial spot. At first the student was instructed to try to find a spot in front of the door of the teacher's house which gave him a good feeling, and another spot which gave him a bad feeling. It took Castaneda most of a night to begin to become faintly aware of the different feelings emanating from different spots. After he gained more sensitivity, the student acquired the habit of getting the feel of larger areas.

This exercise, like many of the teachings of don Juan, is an excellent technique to help zen students become more aware of the right environment. The right environment, like don Juan's beneficial spot, is not a place to fall asleep or a place to get high; it is a place that awakens us to our full ecological nature. It might take us a lifetime to find the right en-

vironment, the place in which our inner and outer selves are harmonized and fully realized. We may never find the right environment, the perfect environment, the zen environment, but this is not really important. The important thing is that we try to become more aware of how different environments alter our image and our expression of our self and that we also try to become aware of how impossible it is to separate ourselves completely from our environment.

In China, in ancient times, many zen monks and poets took the names of their locales as their zen names or their pen names. The most classic example I can think of is Han-shan, who lived in the Tang Dynasty. *Han-shan* means cold mountain. Here are a couple of Han-shan's poems, translated by Gary Snyder, the zen poet who first introduced me to the practice of *zazen*.

I wanted a good place to settle:
Cold Mountain would be safe.
Light wind in a hidden pine—
Listen close—the sound gets better.
Under it a gray-haired man
Mumbles along reading Huang and Lao.
For ten years I haven't gone back home
I've even forgotten the way by which I came.

Cold Mountain is a house
Without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms all vacant and vague
The east wall beats on the west wall
At the center nothing.

Huang and Lao are Chinese sages, and the six doors are symbols of the five senses plus the thinking faculty, which is considered the sixth sense in Buddhism. Gary says that when the Chinese poet "talks about Cold Mountain he means himself, his home, his state of mind." Han-shan didn't just stumble

upon Cold Mountain. He wandered and searched for many years until he found the place that reflected his inmost request, the environment that felt just right, the environment that he knew in his heart was the perfect one to express his own deep understanding of zen.

As long as we are living we are changing, and so the right environment for us at one particular stage in our development may not be the right environment in another. After I was expelled from Tassajara, my hermit *karma* moved me to Big Sur. While Tassajara had been the right environment in which to find myself, Big Sur proved to be the right environment in which to lose myself. Physically and spiritually, Tassajara and Big Sur are very close. While Tassajara lies hidden like a fetus in the secret-most parts of the Santa Lucias, Big Sur clings, like an infant, to the western tits of the coastal range. Big Sur is not really a town or a principality. Although it lies roughly one hundred and fifty miles south of San Francisco, its boundaries are as vague and vacant as those of Cold Mountain. Lillian Bos Ross, author of the famous novel of Big Sur, *Zandy's Bride* (*The Stranger*), ventured into the spiritual wilderness region behind Big Sur when she said, "Perhaps Big Sur is not a country at all, only a state of mind."

Big Sur is an environment lying precariously balanced between mountain and sea, between flesh and spirit, between conscious and unconscious, between male and female, between life and death, between ignorance and wisdom, between heaven and hell, between *samsara* and *nirvana*. Everything in the outer environment of Big Sur magnifies the inner polarities of human nature and intensifies the current that flows through the ecological system. The state of mind of Big Sur is not found in the head or in the heart. As it is in zen, the state of mind of Big Sur is centered in the *hara*—in the guts.

It had been in Big Sur, many years before, that Gary Snyder had first introduced me to zen guts—*zazen*. At that time the state of my mind was located in the suburbs of existence, in the region between my head and my heart, between my intellect

and my emotions. It took many years of zen practice before I was able to settle down near the gut center of my own life. But by the time I left Tassajara, I was living fairly close to it.

My hermit *karma* led me, without hesitation, to the right place in Big Sur, the one which was in harmony with my own state of mind at that time. On the west slope of a mountain blackened by a recent forest fire, at the edge of a secluded meadow two thousand feet above the Pacific Ocean, I was led to an abandoned one-room cabin. Actually, the cabin was only two walls and a roof that leaked, but it was enough to satisfy my hermit spirit. A friend helped me carry three cartons of past *karma* down the slippery, narrow trail to the hermitage. Two of the boxes were full of attachments I was still carrying from my old hometown. One box, the heaviest, was a collection of religious relics and responsibilities I had accumulated at the zen monastery.

After my friend left, I was alone. The east wall of the Pacific Ocean beat on the west wall of the Santa Lucias. With nothing to protect me from my environment, it was not difficult to be at one with it. Many mornings I sat enveloped in cool clouds that drifted in and out of the small hut I named Half-Dipper Hermitage. I lived there for four months on the brink of *nirvana.*

In popular Buddhism, *samsara* is sometimes likened to a process of burning, while *nirvana* is the process of blowing out or cooling. Zen first stirs us up; it makes us more aware of our problems and our illusions, and even creates new ones. But zen also helps us become aware of our deepest karmic nucleus. The Buddhist vow to save all sentient beings originates in the karmic nucleus. *Nirvana* is the peace and calmness experienced when we reach this deep level of ourselves, and accept our *karma.*

While I had been experiencing the full fire of my karmic nucleus at Tassajara the summer before, the mountain where I found Half-Dipper Hermitage was also being swept by a fiery awakening. During the winter the burned-out Hermit and the

burned-over mountain cooled together. And before spring, green sprouts began pushing their way through the blackened ground around the Hermitage. I understand that there are certain species of plants and trees whose seeds sprout only after a fire. Our Buddha-nature may be like a seed that grows in the ashes of our burned-over forest of illusions.

When the mountain was covered with spring wild flowers, my *karma* suddenly and unexpectedly encouraged me to leave the Hermitage. Perhaps I was becoming too attached to it, and if I had stayed I might have turned it into my old hometown. Even if we *think* we have found the source of our self, it is self-defeating, limiting, and, strictly speaking, impossible to remain at the source.

I took only a few things with me: my sewing basket, an Indian blanket, a sleeping bag, a pack, and a few changes of work clothes. The rest of my personal *karma* I left in the care of the Big Sur scavengers who live off the discarded dreams of transients. After I had gone, packrats, friends, and neighbors picked over the bones of my old writings, my books, my personal treasures, my silence, my solitude, and my illusions until there was nothing left of what I had once called my self.

Self? If you go back, as I did once, you'll find only the ruins of a solitary retreat. Clouds drift freely now through the empty hermitage.

With no home where I could settle down, there was nothing to do except settle down where there was no settling down. For weeks I drifted around—with no aims, no expectations—supported and protected only by my good *karma*. I slept in fields, on beaches, in backyards, and occasionally in strange beds. I ate on the road and brushed my teeth in gas-station rest rooms. I was helped on my way by Buddhas driving sports cars, Buddhas driving pickups, Buddhas driving station wagons, and Buddhas driving diesel trucks. I was treated to breakfast in San Simeon by a traveling salesman Buddha, given five dollars in Topanga Canyon by a retired schoolteacher Buddha, propositioned by several horny Buddhas in San Diego, fed tortillas

and refried beans by a *familia* of Mexican Buddhas in Tecate, threatened by a crazy Buddha outside Phoenix, and whisked to safety by a little old Buddha in tennis shoes; I was preached to in Provo by a Seventh Day Adventist Buddha, entertained in Reno by a banjo-playing Buddha, and spoiled in San Francisco by a hospitable Buddha.

A Buddha (one of my *dharma*-sisters) in Carmel told me that Suzuki Roshi was recuperating from a serious illness. He was at Tassajara. It had been over a year since Roshi and I had met for a heart-to-heart talk, so the next morning, after breakfast with my *dharma*-sister, I hitchhiked to the Monastery.

The Buddha who opened the door of Suzuki Roshi's room didn't look as ill as I had been led to expect. We greeted each other warmly, and Roshi invited me in. Since this was an unusual occasion, he said that we should first bow to each other. In the past, whenever I had come to Roshi's room for formal instruction, the disciple had bowed to the zen master. This time Buddha bowed to Buddha. Three times our foreheads touched the floor. Then we knelt at a low table and were served cups of hot green tea by Roshi's attendant. Neither of us felt moved to speak.

It was Roshi who finally broke the silence. "I looked out of my window the day before yesterday," he said, pointing to the small, sliding, paper-covered window behind his low desk, "and I saw you." (Day before yesterday I had been in San Francisco with no intention of going to Tassajara.) "But then I said to myself," Roshi continued, "no, that can't be Marian. That girl is too young." He smiled at me, and his eyes twinkled mischievously. "But now I can see that it *was* you I saw through my window."

I told Roshi how glad I was that *he* looked so well. He said that Japanese men often have their biggest health problems around his age, but if they recover from this critical period they live an unusually long and healthy life. We both agreed that Roshi was on the road to recovery and would live to a ripe old age.

Roshi asked about my own life. I told him that I wasn't practicing *zazen* at the moment, and I didn't expect to return to formal zen training, but that I was happy. I said that I was planning to go back to Big Sur because I felt that it was the right environment for me. I told him that since I had left Tassajara I had discovered that ordinary people, people who knew nothing about Buddhism, had a lot to teach me about zen.

Roshi listened intently, nodding his head now and then. "You are much more humble than when I saw you last," he said, "so the life you are living must be good for you. I can see that you are healthy and happy, and that is all that matters to me."

Suzuki Roshi had poured much time and attention into my zen training. He had hoped that I would wear the Buddhist robes and devote my life to teaching Zen Buddhism. But he let go of my life effortlessly—just as effortlessly as he would let go of his own life a few months later. Neither of us knew then that it would be the last time we were to meet face-to-face—in this life.