

MOUNTAIN

Walking:

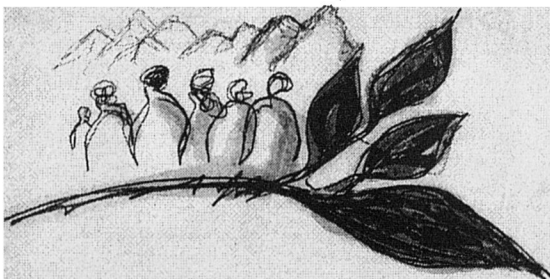
BACKPACKING

Meditation

RETREAT

*We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.*

Li Po



Dorota Streitfeld

The line for walking meditation moved smoothly and quietly along. I could feel the shifting of my weight, the pressure of each step. As usual during a week-long period of practice, I felt the simplicity and directness of just walking without distraction. There was just a slight difference. My back was covered by a fifty-pound pack, my feet were encased in heavy boots, and our meditation hall was a shady grove of old growth trees along the White River in the Cascade Mountains. This would be a different retreat.

Inspired by a friend's tales of practicing with the Ring of Bone Zendo's Mountains and Rivers sesshins in the wilderness of Northern California, and armed with photocopies of some basic information the Ring of Bone people had put together, I had lightheartedly suggested that our group, the Dharma Sound Zen Center, put together a backpacking retreat. And after arranging for Dae Kwang Zen Master to fly out from the Providence Zen Center where he is the guiding teacher, after soliciting interested practitioners from our sangha, after trips to the REI store and food co-ops, and after what seemed like a very short meeting to get organized, we were on our way.

This would be a walking Zen retreat. Morning and evening practice, with a long walking meditation filling our day. And rather than snaking our way back to a building or Zen hall after ten minutes, we would settle our practice circle wherever we chose to stop. Rather than deciding just how much cool air to let in the room or how high to turn the lights, we would let nature choose for us. Had to, really. We had stepped off of the raised platform labeled "Control" that we usually enjoy in the city. We were not in charge. Gloriously out of the egocentric throne we imagine ourselves to occupy most days.

After half an hour or so we stop for a short meditation by the river and an opening talk by Dae Kwang Zen Master. He mentions that we'll be practicing in silence for the week, just doing the minimum communication for cooking and camp chores, but letting our tongues rest otherwise. The better to hear the teachings of the river and trees, the subtle pointing-out instructions contained in the bird calls and scurrying of chipmonks. Dae Kwang Zen Master encourages us to maintain our practice throughout the day, especially while walking. I've brought along a short mala to remind myself of my mantra, to link it up with my steps and breath.

After the talk we ease on our packs and silently walk off down the deserted trail. Mid-week and off-season, we hope to have the woods mostly to ourselves. With seven days of food and fuel, plus tents, clothes and assorted knickknacks, the weight is undeniable. I ask myself, "Am I a pack animal or a human?" Definitely have a body here... we're having an "in the body experience" as we walk. "This very body is the body of the Buddha." Zen Master Hakuin's song seems true in a different way than before. Very real body, real sweat, real weight, real sound of water flowing.

Here we are. Home at last.

The rhythmic clacking of two rocks wakes me. The sound fades and rises in strength as the wake-up person walks the camp. A predawn greyness fills the sky and the air has a gentle nip as we squirm out of our sleeping bags to wash up with cold water from the creek and sip a cup of hot tea the cooks have made. My job has become "bear bagger." I walk over to the tree we've hung our food in and juggle down the stuff sacks filled with our meals, treats and toothpaste for the week. Brother bear is a member of the greater sangha here in the mountains, but needs to find his own dinners, so we string our food up in a tree each night for safekeeping.

We all pull out a pad and something to use as a zafu, and come to the practice area for morning sitting. The temperature is cool enough to keep us all awake, and with the slight incline of the hill, I'm sitting without any cushion at all under my bum. Simple and elegant, close to the original style of yogis out in the forest. Save for all the Goretex and goosedown, of course.

The campsite is on a ridge, so our group shapes into a simple line, following the contour. We face across the valley, a long view into space and openness. We are on the shady side and let the dawn light

up the other side of the meditation hall as we sit in the breeze that rises with the sun. A handclap signals walking meditation, and we lace on boots to walk around the meadow. People slip off to pee or get gloves as we walk, coming back to our seats for another clap to signal sitting.

It feels completely natural to be sitting in silence here in the middle of an even greater silence. My mind is loose and relaxed, yet awake. The struggles with stray thoughts or grogginess are somehow less pronounced or less important than in a retreat inside a building. As we sit in the silence and the chilly air, a group of deer arrive on their morning rounds, comfortably picking their way through us, completely at ease as they eat their breakfast grass. Raising up heads to gaze at us with what seem to be enormous, unmoving eyes, they decide they are safe and continue to graze. I'm reminded of our dharma ancestor Han Am Sunim and how no dogs would bark or babies cry when he was nearby, so clear and strong was his mind. Without thoughts of self, we are naturally one with all our relations.

Sitting ends and breakfast arrives. Our meals are one-

bowl affairs, with no choices in menu and everything served until it's gone. Just eat. Tea to clean the bowls. Drink the tea and we're done, except I've caught a glance of my face and twisted hair in the bottom of the bowl. My fellow traveller, who are you? He answers with silence and he doesn't go away, that one I don't know; as we clean the pots and pack up the tents. Now we have work period. Putting away our little huts of nylon fabric and aluminum poles. Repacking food and getting out shorts and sunblock for the warmth and light that is moving towards us across the valley. Still in silence, the silence that seems to hold us like a container, together in a way that I rarely feel outside of retreat.

We gather together, and walk off, up towards the pass. We walk up and up on a steep set of switchbacks through fields of wildflowers standing in warm sunshine. The head

of the valley is filled with the sound of rushing water as snowmelt runs down the scree- and talus-covered slope. It all seems such a gift, unbought and unimagined by anyone. We surprise a marmot out for his morning sun. He retreats to a hillock, then watches us as he whistles an alarm for other mountainside residents. "The two-leggeds are coming!"



Still standing, balanced on hind legs, he doesn't retreat but stands and stares and watches us climb up and out of his little meadow. Just watching with his small mouth open as we walk off.

My world shrinks way down to a small scope. Step... step... step. The labored sound of my breath coming in and out. The sight of the trail in front of me or the pack of the person just ahead in line. Mantra. Move one bead. Mantra. Move one bead. Mantra. I remember a Tibetan teacher telling me that mantra means "mind protection." It sweeps me out, cleans off the slate of awareness so the facts come through. The body. The trail. The taste of the air. And my unknown fellow traveller, that face in the bottom of the bowl.

A hand clap. Rest break. And we are in nature's candy store. Surrounded by berries. Huckleberries, plump and ripe, hang from little bushes all over the hillside. Free food! Not bought, not carried, not planted, and not sprayed. My hands are soon stained purple and I start to feel like brother bear as I ramble from bush to bush munching contentedly.

The feeling of a visit home, a visit to a place where we were meant to be, rises again. The tart and pulpy berries are as sweet as any home-baked snack I've known. Another hand clap and we move on. Upwards. This morning is only up. Now out onto the saddle of the ridge, up into a different bioclimatic zone. It looks something like tundra, with small twisted trees and tight clumps of grass and a chill wind blowing over the top.

We pause and look over into the Napeequa Valley, a deep V shape spread out before us. The trail winds down and down into what has become a grey and chilled expanse. Without the heat of walking up and with no sun, our bodies cool quickly and out comes an assortment of sweaters, sweatpants and rain coats. We've put on our fur and walk down to lunch out of the wind.

We eat in a circle, with the squeaky barks of pika echoing off of the rocks. We're next to an ice field, and after cheese and bread and hot broth, walk up to see. Of all things, I see a small bug run across the ice and dive down a tiny hole. Without thinking, I scrape the soft ice with my finger to see where on earth it could have gone. The bug ends up on the ice again, not moving. Ah!! What have I done? A Buddhist come all the way to this wild world only to murder an innocent bug! I gently scoop the tiny thing onto my hand and try to warm it. It starts to move and trot around my palm but obviously missing a couple of legs. My one small mistake means that this little one's life may well be over. As I hold him in my hand he runs off down my arm into my sleeve. I say a prayer for him and walk on.

The ice field has a cave, with an opening in the center of the field where the central runoff spills out. A few of us climb down and enter yet another world, one of ice and freezing water. The cave spreads and grows as we follow it to the side. It ends in a kind of ice hall, lit aquamarine from the ice and feeling like a secret hall of the mountain spirit. Sahn Shin, in Korean. The one the old ladies prayed to every morning at Hwa Gye Sah temple near Seoul, when I lived there. We walk down out of our alpine world to grey skies and raindrops.

The first few days we've had lots of sun and warmth, and now the rain god visits. A final skin appears on our little herd as ponchos and rainpants get taken out and zipped on. The trail down is steep and exposed. My mantra wheel is running round and round. We step... step... step... down into the mud and forest-cover. This is a hard point for me. I have a strong dislike for getting really wet, and this is not

just a shower but a Northwest rainstorm. Just walk. Let my neck get wet. Yuk! Let it go. Yuk! Let it go. Just walk. Feel the drops hitting my poncho. It turns out OK. Water is after all just wet.

We reach camp and set up in the rain. Collect wood for a fire and start to dry out under the trees. The rain lets up in the evening and we decide to keep our food in camp rather than get it wet in the rain. This despite the enormous bear scat smack in the middle of the trail just before camp. Rather than keeping to what has been our night schedule of practice from midnight to 2:00 am, we decide to sit in shifts until morning to watch the food. Dae Kwang Zen Master and I take the midnight to 2:00 am shift and sit down to the primal television and first visualization of all: our campfire. Just letting the flames fill our field of vision, letting the shapes appear and disappear in front of us.

Despite the damp chill, the sitting again comes easily, with the sense of being supported by everything seen and unseen in the circle around the fire. My unknown friend loses his solidity and there is just the smells of the woods and sounds of the night. Just a great mystery. We take breaks from sitting to dry our clothes.

I have a sense, in the flickers of the fire, of our having gone down the lineage tree, down past our teacher, Seung Sahn Zen Master and his teacher Ko Bong Zen Master; way down to Buddhists and Taoists who lived far away and long ago; down to shamans and native healers; down to places we don't pay much mind to these days. Down to our nature and the belly of our common mother. It feels good. Feels like coming home.

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