

Meditating in Wilderness

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi led the first sesshin I ever did. It was at the Sokoji Temple in San Francisco in 1965. For decades thereafter I was an avid sesshin participant, but now my retreats are mostly in ordinary rooms at home - or in wilderness. Last summer my wife Tamara and I did a twenty-four hour meditation vigil after a two-day hike deep into the Sawtooth Mountains of central Idaho. Some years we set up two little camps out of sight of each other and meditate alone. This year we stay together.

We begin at noon on a clear, sunny day. Our tent is pitched at a favorite campsite – a grassy meadow cupped on three sides by steep slopes rising up to snow-covered peaks. A small stream, swollen by snowfields melting under intense summer sun, winds through camp. We agree to fast till noon tomorrow, although we'll take water as needed in this high, dry atmosphere. We'll not lie down, except for a brief sleep in the night. We'll stay within view of each other, but will not talk. In silence, we'll share each other's presence.

We embrace, bow gently toward each other, then slowly take our ways around the meadow. I look for a place that beckons me to sit. After a time, I see that Tamara is moving high above me, walking among great boulders where our meadow rises up to cliffs. I settle near our tent on a thick grassy hummock where the stream dashes into a small, glassy pool. The swift water cuts steep banks in the tough, resilient sod, and the mossy sides of this miniature canyon are honeycombed with mouse-sized holes. For years I've observed these little tunnels, but have never seen who lives there.

I ease into the long afternoon. My hummock allows me to cross my legs comfortably, keep my spine and neck erect, and drop my gaze softly on the pulsing waters. My ears fill with the bubbling rush. Again and again my awareness returns to my breath, rests on the breath. Occasionally I rise to stretch, slowly walk about the edges of the stream, stand for a time in place, and again return to my seat. Above me Tamara has settled near a huge boulder perched on steep talus, where she has sweeping views of the great ring of mountains. Below her, lakes step down the valley. When we first came together into the Sawtooths, I wondered if she could enjoy the austere glacial cirques that

had always pulled me higher and higher. Now it is she who commands the granite cliffs and jagged peaks, while I am drawn down to the mossy little meadow.

As the afternoon wanes, at the rushing edge of the stream, I sense quick motion. A water rat, dripping, emerges from the water and rests on a tiny muddy landing before one of the holes. He's the size of a very large mouse - sleek, plump, a glistening gray-brown. Sensing my attention, he flings himself back into the middle of the rushing water. Will he be carried clear to the lake? But in a flash he reappears a few feet downstream at another muddy landing. Here, sheltered, safe from my reach, he watches. Soon, more water rats visit me. They cavort in the tumbling water, dashing in and out of their holes. One inches up the bank to nibble at the seedy tops of grasses. I feel warm, blessed.

That night Tamara and I lie side by side in sleeping bags under an open sky. Frost gathers on moss and grasses and on our bags. Icy stars swarm overhead. At sunrise, I wake to see Tamara already high up the mountain slope, sitting in the sun. I get up, stretch, pull on warm clothes, and make my way slowly back to my hummock. At noon we approach each other with slow smiles, embrace, then sit to boil water for soup.

Cradling her cup in two hands, leaning back against a granite ledge, Tamara says softly, "I was freezing before dawn, so I headed up to catch the first rays of the sun."

"What called you to go so high yesterday?" I ask.

"I think I needed everything to open out before me. And to see the little lake cradled below in the arms of the mountains. The lake was alive – golds and blues rippling as the light and wind changed. There's more. It's hard to find the words."

"Ah," I say, thinking of the water rats, "It is hard."

I reach over to squeeze her hand. I move next to her. We both lean back against granite and sip our cups of soup.

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