

Chapter 11

Emptiness

And so I, the quiet bookworm, began leading the life of a Warrior, secretly. It was a truly new experience, a new way of experiencing the world in which I had always lived, for the battlefield of this particular Warrior was the same old library, and my little room at the hermitage, and the alley down which I traveled to go to market for my vegetables in the evening. I really did feel like a different person, for I had a totally different purpose that I had had in the past. Going through life before had seemed like walking down a boulevard lined with shops; I was a shopper, a consumer, looking into the windows to see if there was something I wanted, and then doing whatever was necessary to get what I wanted.

Life as the Warrior was entirely different. I really was a knight in shining armor, and walking on my two little feet was like riding some great powerful horse, and looking around myself at the library or on the road was like viewing some great vista from a seat of royalty: I looked at all my subjects, all my children, around me, and dreamt up ways of serving them, of keeping them happy, and assuring their future and ultimate happiness. I gave them all I could, kind words, kindly looks, a pat on the back, what little money I had, and a few words of encouragement, with as much of the spiritual as I thought they could hear happily; while in the back of my mind I was also offering them great piles of jewels, deep spiritual realizations, all the things in the world that no person claimed their own—the blue of the sky, the sound of the sea, the flowers that grew on every mountain on the planet, and I did so sincerely, although no one ever knew, and I did so with the wish that all I offered they could one day possess, especially enlightenment itself; and above all I found a deep and contented joy growing within myself daily, hour by hour.

As the joy increased my thirst increased, for I knew that my lessons were not complete, and like a horse near water I knew I was near, nearer & nearer, and I felt nearly an obsession to reach the goals I knew now were reachable: I wanted to find perfection, I knew I could reach my mother, I knew she was near now, and instinct told me that I was close enough now to see the Golden One again as well, and that the end of my searching, and the finding of what I sought, and my mother, and the masters of the Garden, and the Golden One would all before long join one with the other. And so I went to the Garden, thinking that perhaps the night for this had come.

I remember distinctly the date it happened, nothing could make me forget, it was the twenty-eighth of July, and summer was at its height. I entered the Garden late at night, well after the earth had cooled from the heat of the day, and sat on the foot of the bench beneath the carob, drinking in the sweet smell of the desert breezes, sweet respite from the still & burning feel of the daytime, a feel that struck the face and dried the nose and eyes, like the wind from an oven.

I sat and prepared to enter meditation, going through the preparatory steps slowly, with relish, as though I were putting on a soft old glove, or beginning a conversation with some dear old friend. I was nearly finished when I sensed a motion at the gate of the Garden, and then saw a small form moving quietly down the row of crimson desert roses along the northern wall. The form stooped at one bush, as though saying a silent prayer, and then moved off again.

I caught sight of the head of a monk, well formed and cropped short, with velvet-like black hair, and then the robes and body followed. I had not seen much more than these brief clues before I found myself involuntarily on my feet, with my palms joined at my breast, bowed in deep respect. I glanced up almost in fear, in awe, for before me was Gautama, the Buddha himself, and although he was nothing like what I might have expected, there was absolutely no denying, and no questioning, who He was.

He was not tall, but only medium in height, and his frame was somewhat slight, and slightly bent, in a kind of modesty that nearly seemed like shyness. His every gesture was simple & graceful, as was his entire appearance, and his robes: clean, graceful, simply hung on his simple form, soft & natural with a lifetime of wear. His age no one could have guessed, I suppose I would say about twenty-seven or twenty-eight, but his face gave no certain clue. It was simple itself, and the first impression, besides the modesty, was one of simple honesty: the eyes were gentle & open, rarely blinking, often down in modesty, and there was a quiet happiness in the way his face was held—in the slight but graceful smile, and the smooth, intelligent face. His skin and the rest were the same as yours or mine, it was not as though he were blazing in light or anything of the like, but there was a different kind of radiance about him, one with no color or shape, a kind of clear warmth that bathed his eyes and face and his gentle hands, all the way down to his humble, bare feet; and this warmth radiated forth and filled the Garden, and bathed my being, and bade me to bow, before One who seemed to neither need nor wish any bow. And I bowed.

“Sit,” he spoke quietly, “sit, please sit.” And I sat instinctively there, on the grass before the bench, and bowed again sitting, praying that he himself would sit there, on the bench. This he did quite naturally, although with a bit of hesitation, as though he did not consider himself worthy of such a throne. And he sat quietly, looking down at the grass, almost abashed, like a young girl alone before a stranger. We sat quietly.

After some time he reached his hand out toward me, and I saw that he had plucked one of the red roses from the bushes on his way in. He didn’t speak, he only held it out towards me, as if asking me to look at it, which I did. No words passed between us, I simply looked at the rose, and have no idea what he himself may have been looking at, for I felt still too much in awe of him to gaze into his face.

He withdrew then the rose suddenly, and put three fingers under my chin, and raised my face slowly up to meet his eyes. And then he said “Rose,” and reached the same fingers of both hands to my eyelids, and closed them, and kept his fingers there. In my mind I pictured a rose, a perfect red rose.

Then his fingers opened my eyes again, and he reached out toward me again, holding the rose,

and said, "Do not think 'rose'." And I tried not to think "rose," I tried not to see the picture I had just seen of the rose, and I looked into his hand again. For just an instant, for just a brief flash, I saw a tiny corner of red, outlined against the dark of the night air, and then my eye jumped and saw something roundish and red, farther down, and finally something green, and thin, and straight. And then in the next moment I was again looking at a rose.

"Again," he said simply.

He let me look at the rose, and then he pulled back his hand, and then he gently closed my eyelids, and then he said again, "Rose." I thought of "rose," there was the outline and color of a rose in my thoughts, and then he gently pushed my eyes open again, and again said, "Do not think 'rose'." And then he opened his hand before me, and again, for a moment, my eyes danced across some colors & shapes, before an instant later I saw a rose in my mind, and before my eyes.

Then he stooped and touched his finger to the ground, and brought up on the tip of it a tiny black ant. He touched his finger to the side of the rose, and let the ant climb onto the rose; the ant began to race across the petals, leaning out over thin air and then reversing itself, racing across to the opposite side, leaning out into the air, nearly falling off the rose, and then racing farther on again, in obvious panic. Gautama touched the rose to the ground, and the black ant raced off into the blades of the grass.

And then he cupped the rose in his hand, and all I could see was the back of his hand. He held the hand to his face, and opened his deep brown eyes wide, and with his head slightly cocked to the side looked at the rose himself, gazed upon the rose. All I could see was his eyes, but in his eyes I saw some extraordinary contentment, some kind of extraordinary happiness with the rose, and I knew in that moment that it could not be the same thing I had looked at. Gautama closed his hand gently around the rose, and turned those shining eyes to mind.

"For a moment," he said quietly, "you saw the rose before you thought 'rose,' and it was only a few simple shapes and pieces of color. Then your mind thought of these as 'rose.' The poor ant also perceived these same shapes and colors, but thought only 'threat,' and then 'death,' and ran for his life. When I looked at these same colors and pieces of shape, I saw all of eternity, and all the minds of every being in existence, and loved them."

Gautama paused, and closed his eyes, as if waiting for my mind to grasp his words, and then think on them clearly, before he continued. And then he reached out his hand again, and opened it, and asked me, "Who saw this thing right? What is this thing? Is it a rose? Is it the Lord of Death? Is it all humanity, and perfect love?"

In his presence I felt as though my mind were someone else's, as though it belonged to some great & enlightened saint, and I had no hesitation to answer, and no need to answer in words. The thing he had in his hand was each of these things, and none of these things. It was to each of the three beings who looked upon it truly what they saw; it was in sum all the things it appeared to be to all three; and it could never have been three completely different things at once. It was what each saw it to be.

He closed his hand again, and paused again. He leaned and whispered to me, fiercely, “See it now as eternity; see it now as all humanity, and know the perfect love for them that I do.” And then he opened his hand again, and in almost a trance of joy I looked eagerly into the palm and saw—a simple rose.

I closed my eyes in disappointment, and said only, “I cannot.”

“I know,” he said.

“Why?”

“You know very well; you see only what your mind forces you to see; you see only what the imprints in your mind allow you to see, even though you are looking upon exactly the same thing that I am looking upon, when I see all of eternity, and all of life, and feel all love for it.”

I closed my eyes and thought “rose.” I opened my eyes and saw “rose.” He raised his legs up to the bench and crossed them, under his robes, and went into meditation. I crossed my legs, and I went into meditation. The silence grew. I lost the sounds of the Garden, and then I lost the smells and feel of the Garden, and then I lost the feeling of sitting in the Garden, and then finally I lost the feeling even of thinking, and even of myself. It was perfectly & totally still.

I saw emptiness. And it was only that, and I saw it. There was nothing else.

When it was over things began to come back. I was aware of coming down, and then I was aware of myself again. I was aware then, in that moment, for the first time, that I had seen emptiness.

I knew then that I had seen an Enlightened One, and so I knew then that Enlightened Ones really existed.

I knew then, perfectly, that I would myself become an Enlightened One, in the space of seven lifetimes, and so I knew then that my future lives really existed.

I knew then that the Path was perfectly true.

I knew they would not call me by my name when I became an Enlightened One.

I knew the seven lives would be good, no more real suffering, and surrounded by loving parents, and good & learned teachers, and spiritual friends & teachings, exactly as I needed, without fail.

I knew that what I had seen was true. I could never doubt these things again. I knew I was not mistaken, I knew I was not somehow deluded or crazy. I knew that no one, ever, could say anything that would ever make me doubt what I had seen.

I knew that I knew what every holy book in the world said; I knew that I knew the great ocean of

knowledge entirely, as though it were reduced to a teardrop in a child's eye. And I knew the truth of these holy books, and I knew I must give my life to keep them in this world, for others to come after me.

I loved every living thing. A light came out of my chest, a powerful pillar of light, with no color, and it went out, and it touched every living thing, and I knew then that I would always live for each of them, and only for them, and that there was nothing else for me ever to do.

I knew the pictures of the Enlightened Ones were true. I knew we had to care for them. I knew that I must bow down to them, and when it was time to rise, I threw myself on the ground before them.

I knew I had seen a different reality, a true reality, a truly higher and pure reality. I knew there was no thing like this reality in the reality I had known. I knew that the reality I had known was not a pure reality. I knew there was nothing in this reality that could ever be pure. But I knew that, of all the things in this reality, the diamond was one thing that was in some small way close to being pure, purely hard, purely clear, and pure throughout, nearly.

I knew I would die. I knew my mind was not yet pure. I knew my mind was seeing things wrong, and always had, until the moment I saw emptiness. I knew that even now, once I had come down, I was again seeing things wrong, and would continue to do so until I was nearly enlightened. I knew I could read minds. I knew that, if I developed myself carefully, I could perform miracles.

I knew I was now someone different because, of all the people in the world, I had seen emptiness, and I had seen all these other things, and I no longer had to suffer as before. It was over with; I was on my way out, with certainty, with a sweet certainty that I would carry with me forever after.

I looked up to Gautama in gratitude. He gazed down at me, in total silence, and complete joy. He knew everything.

