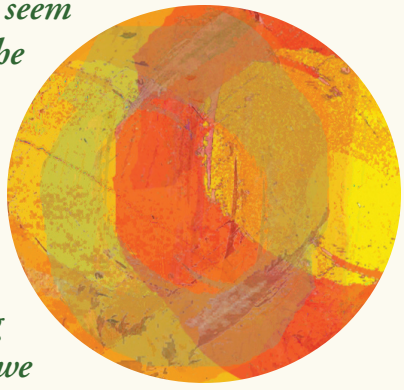
Sara Jenkins

# IN THE FOREST, IN THE RAIN

*Rinchen and I meet for what we call working meditation retreats, spending two or three days together, mostly in silence. We don't plan our retreats very far in advance; they just seem to come around, like the seasons. We follow a daily schedule, which, as in Zen retreats, includes several hours of work in the morning and again in the afternoon. Along with sitting meditation, we practice meditative dialog, and because we are both writers, we use the work periods for writing.*



The house where we meet is in a forest, surrounded by hemlocks and rhododendrons, facing a rocky stream and a waterfall. At this moment in late April, dogwood has sprouted its first tiny leaves, paired upward-pointing hearts in the freshest newborn chartreuse. They remind me of the heart-shaped leaves of the Bo tree, which sheltered the Buddha as

he sat it out all the way to enlightenment. Today venerable Bo trees shelter countless shrines in Asia. Rinchen and I do not worship, we have no shrines, and yet the air we breathe here carries a delicate suggestion of a holy place, like the faintest trace of incense. No, not a place, but a holy time—the time we have dedicated to this purpose.

Neither of us remembers how the idea for these retreats first arose. I think the seed was planted years ago. We were among a group of Zen students who, when our teacher could not come to a sesshin at the last minute, held it anyway. We took turns ringing bells and leading walking meditation, and everything was arranged so that no one would need to communicate with anyone else for the duration of the retreat. Everyone was on time for every sitting, from early morning until late night. Four days of silence. No writing notes, no writing of any kind, no eye contact.

Until that time, I had perceived the teacher as a restraining force against which I could rebel, bending guidelines to suit myself; for example, never actually missing meditation, but not heading to the hall until the last possible minute and having to run to make it before the bell. The absence of the teacher was an opportunity for us to find discipline within ourselves. The responsibility had to arise within each individual, of course, and yet the supportive strength of sangha in that situation could hardly be exaggerated.

I didn't recognize the sangha aspect of that retreat because I wasn't thinking in those terms then. I was still discovering the richness of silence, and throughout the teacherless sesshin the silence was almost palpable, a presence in itself.

Leaving that teacherless retreat together, Rinchen and I did not speak for a long time. When we did, we agreed that we wanted more of that silence in our lives. Eventually it occurred to us that we didn't have to wait for somebody else to impose silence and structure; we could offer that to ourselves, by having our own retreats.

As in some Zen retreats, our schedule is drawn up when we arrive, not ahead of time. This is significant: the schedule is not imposed externally but arises in fresh response to our needs and the situation. In general it follows this pattern:

We rise and have breakfast separately and in silence.

**9 am—We sit on facing cushions and meditate for half an hour.**
**9:30—We raise our eyes and begin our practice of meditative dialog, which may involve long periods of silence.**
**10—We return to silence and write.**
**12:30—One of us fixes lunch while the other continues to work, and we remain silent during that time.**
**1 pm—Lunch; we talk quietly while we eat and then take a walk.**
**2—We return to silence and writing.**
**5—Still silent, we have free time for yoga, reading, sitting outside.**
**6—The silence ends and we fix supper, eat, and clean up.**
**8 pm—Sitting meditation for half an hour, followed by open-ended dialog that often continues until we go to bed, in silence.**

We may have sat together before breakfast on our first retreat; I don't remember. Sometimes we have had a sitting period before or after lunch, sometimes not.

Whatever schedule we adopt, we do not always adhere to it perfectly. We no longer see the schedule as a restraining force, *in loco parentis*, as it were, just as we no longer see the teacher that way. Sitting meditation, dialog, and writing are what we want to spend our time on, and pursuing those activities within the structure provided by the schedule makes them all the more focused, meaningful, true. The schedule serves our most cherished purposes. Why wouldn't we want to follow it? Well, conditioned minds have their reasons. We might want to have a snack or talk or take a nap, and we might do those things. But the presence of the other person is a reminder of our purpose in being together in that particular way, a way different from ordinary life in which we unconsciously succumb to—indeed, are almost entirely driven by—the siren songs of ego.

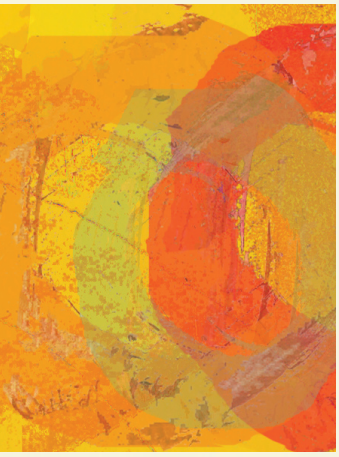
Nor is our environment as controlled as it would be at a retreat center. Most notably, there is an elderly cocker spaniel who

***Within awareness, attention may fix on fear and turmoil, but awareness itself is stable.***

***I let my attention rest in awareness, the ultimate refuge.***

spends most of the time asleep, until we begin to meditate. Then he wakes up, walks back and forth between us, clicks his toenails on the floor, paws obsessively at an old towel he plays with, snuffles, and—most distracting of all—stands close in front of each of us, looking up into our lowered eyes.

A childhood memory comes to me: looking into the eyes of my kitten—this creature I love so utterly—and wondering, Who are you? What are you? The question we ask ourselves, in one way or another. The question with no answer. The question at the heart of spiritual practice.



When I sink into doubt and despair, my teacher advises me to ask the classic questions, who experiences doubt, who is in despair? Recently she suggested something different—that in low moments, I say to myself, I am a person on the path to awakening.

I look into the mirror and face the being I know so intimately, yet do not know.

Beneath the placid surface of silence and schedule, any retreat has the potential for serious internal upheaval. In my retreats with Rinchen, there have been two such incidents.

On one retreat we inserted forty-five-minute periods of "real" work, clearing branches and debris left from a fallen tree, pruning overgrown bushes, and weeding. Our aim was to treat work as meditation, our guidelines to focus on the immediate activity rather than the result and to maintain mindfulness of body, thoughts, and feelings. We worked in silence, stopping periodically to stand together and take several breaths, bring our minds to the present, relax our bodies, and recommit to our tasks at a gentle pace.

It was early summer, and we started our schedule at 8:30, working outside until 9:15. When we finished the outdoor work, we changed clothes, sat down on our facing cushions, and spent a few minutes reflecting, in meditative dialog form, on our experience during the work period. Then we returned to the scheduled periods of sitting meditation and writing. In the afternoon we stopped writing an hour early for another forty-five-minute period of outdoor work, plus reflection. The season, the day, the warm air seemed to bless our efforts: close by, bumblebees pursued their own tasks, and in the woods around us, an ancient species of magnolia blossomed with ragged pale-yellow stars.

Rinchen's relationship to work is problematic; she has never liked the manual labor involved in our Zen practice. But we share the commitment to face what is hard, and working meditation offered areas of aversion for both of us. In my case, what's problematic is being in charge. Thus, on our retreat, my taking the role of "work director" is not because I know more than she does about yard work but because being in charge is hard for me. Telling someone else what to do "brings up my conditioning," as we say, meaning that ego is uncomfortable, and the mind fills with reasons to avoid the disagreeable task.

That first morning we walked the few yards from the front door to the driveway armed with garden tools and work gloves and guidelines from Zen retreats, our mission involving, ostensibly, overgrown vegetation. As I look back on that scene, I am touched by our earnestness: spiritual warriors, venturing forth to confront our demons. Inviting our demons to meet us at that time and place, for the purpose of getting to know them. That is, getting to know us.

The morning work period went well. But Rinchen did not appear for the afternoon period. What to do? In our tradition, the work director role involves seeing that each person has what is needed for the job, including encouragement to resist ego's promptings to push ahead to the result, or do the job differently from the original assignment, or quit when it gets hard. But I had no idea what was going on with Rinchen. What to do?

I went off to my immediate task, moving tree limbs from a big pile at the edge of the driveway. What if Rinchen were asleep? What was my responsibility? I felt resentment arise, felt how it tensed my body. I would drag a branch from the pile up a little clay slope and into the woods, my mind briefly on the task, then riddled with worry.

What if Rinchen had given in to her aversion and decided work wasn't her thing after all? Fear flooded in, alarm surged in my solar plexus: our

joint effort would be abandoned, I would be abandoned, even humiliated if she derided my commitment, my seriousness. I heaved a branch into a clearing and stumbled back down the clay bank.

What if it was Rinchen who was humiliated, ashamed at having given up? The alarm sank into my abdomen, ominous, pressing. I lifted the end of a big branch. The leafy end caught in other branches, and I tried to jerk it free, tension mounting in my head and neck.

A cue to pause. I laid the branch down, stood still, and let my attention follow my breath. Where is my conditioning in this? I asked myself. I don't know what to do, and I feel as if I should know, because I am in the role of being in charge. Which I hate. What's beneath that resistance? Fear. If I confront my friend, she might challenge—or worse, ignore—my authority. Resent me, not like me, leave me. I felt like a whimpering toddler.

Amazing how much ego reaction boils down to childhood abandonment.

What if instead of feeling myself to be in charge I thought of what I could offer? If Rinchen were sunk in her own conditioned reaction, shame, say, what would be the most helpful, compassionate, enlightened response? Ah—to help her see that suffering is unnecessary. Not my job to get her out of bed, to enforce the schedule, to defend my earnestness. But I could point out that suffering serves no purpose and can be let go.

I freed the tree limb from the pile of brush and dragged it into the woods. Worry subsided, and I kept my attention on the physical experience as I moved the rest of the brush pile, finishing just as our work period ended.

No Rinchen. What would happen? How would things unfold? No way to know.

I went to my room, changed clothes, and since Rinchen wasn't there for our scheduled dialog, went onto the deck and did yoga. I was lying in relaxation when Rinchen came out. She asked if I would dialog with her, even though it was an hour behind schedule. I agreed, and we moved to our facing cushions.

We sat in silence, our eyes open. Breathing. At ease. Gentle movement of air on skin. In the woods around us the pale magnolia stars, luminous in the late afternoon sun. Into that full and empty space, Rinchen released a single sentence.

"I just realized that I don't have to say a thing."

Yes. Rinchen is there, I thought. Or rather, we are here. Not a word need be said, by her or by me.

—

The other unsettling incident also occurred in dialog and involved very few words. It was nighttime, and we sat on our cushions in a dark room with a candle lit between us. Looking into each other's eyes, we described our body sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Our pauses became longer and longer. My memory is that we settled into such deep stillness that the normal inner agitation subsided, and we rested easily in each other's gaze. Then Rinchen spoke.

"I see through you."

The shock felt seismic. What words could be more frightening to ego? My mind lurched into protective mode, anticipating attack. Never have I felt so vulnerable. Not only naked, but transparent, seen through. And yet my body remained still. It felt as if I had spent my whole life hiding flaws that now would be exposed, although, oddly, no particular flaws came to mind. The terror seemed to be about being judged.

We are here together, my teacher once said to me in what I perceived as a tirade, and you act as if you are alone. Those words had served as a central koan in my life (and may apply to all of us suffering under the illusion of separate selfhood). Now Rinchen and I were together, and I could not run, hide, pretend, or act as if I were alone. Our agreement was to look together at whatever was there to be seen.

Eons passed before I found words.

"What do you see?"

*What if, instead of feeling myself to be in charge, I thought of what I could offer?*

Within awareness, attention may fix on fear and turmoil, but awareness itself is stable. I let my attention rest in awareness, the ultimate refuge. Something in me would survive, I sensed, however devastating the reply. I sat still, in total terror and in deep calm.

"You know more than you admit."

Now, it might seem like a reprieve to hear those words rather than, say, "You know less than you think," not to mention words naming my acts of cruelty or folly or deviousness. What I remember, though, was a vast sinking, as if the ground beneath me had vanished and gravity along with it; disorientation, almost dissolution. What was it that I knew and would not admit? The secret seemed as limitless as the universe, and completely closed to me.

*At times each of us has considered giving up sitting practice, and yet we never do.*

"Know about what?" I asked.

"About the spiritual path."

An involuntary wish to disappear, an impulse I had felt before when my teacher refused to accept my assertion that I didn't know what I was doing in my practice. Now I could not hide behind the student role; Rinchen and I had become our own teachers, our own windows onto ourselves and each other. We hide our wisdom from ourselves, but not from our teachers, not from our spiritual friends.

Rinchen and I have practiced sitting meditation more or less regularly—dutifully, even—for many years. Gradually the balance of our attention has shifted away from sitting meditation and toward maintaining mindfulness in ordinary activity. At times each of us has considered giving up sitting practice, and yet we never do.

We wonder if once people set foot on the spiritual path, they are on it forever, regardless of how long it takes to get there.

Get where?

We've both been reading books by Advaita masters about enlightenment, the once-and-for-all, ever-after kind, not the momentary glimpses that leave us tangled in longing. Are we going for ever-after enlightenment, we ask each other? My teacher says that one result of dharma practice is that we grow up, we become adults. Jiyu-Kennett, a Zen teacher admired by my teacher, called Buddhism "an adult religion." Vipassana teacher Matt Flickstein says it's easy to find people who have had enlightenment experiences, but rare to find people who are truly adult. Rinchen and I decide that our aim is adulthood. If enlightenment lies further along that same axis, so much the better.

During one dialog session, when I lower my eyes, the shape of Rinchen's head glows in afterimage against her body, like an inner being deep inside her, the same size but without surface features. I sense a similar being within myself. We speak through our personalities, but does something in that speaking come from these deeper aspects? The words that emerge in this meditative communication are so

simple, so direct, so clear, so compassionate—even as they take us into unexplored territory, where we encounter unexpected subtleties and unspeakable complexities, pain and fear, awe and ease and joy. That is the fruit of giving full attention to what we say. After the dialog, I think, This is how I want to be with people.

On a walk we stop at the edge of a lake. Fish turn to face us in the clear water. Are they looking at us, as the dog looks at us, oblivious to our personalities,

asking the wordless question, Who are you? What are you?

**One evening** rain drowns out the sound of the waterfall. We sit in meditation with the rain. When it is time for dialog, there is a sense of, why speak at all?

We do speak a little, quietly, embraced in the sounds of the forest, and then our speaking dies down.

The rain stops. We continue to sit, our schedule abandoned. We sit in the hum of fridge, the chant of frogs, the murmur of the waterfall. Fridge hum stops. Frog sounds fill the world. Are the frogs speaking to us? Or are we, in our listening, asking them the same question the fish and the dog ask in their looking at us?

Frog chant fades into a few solo voices, falls off into single notes, then silence. Still we sit. At some point it seems clear that the last frog has spoken. We rise without speaking, go out onto the porch, stand in the dark facing the waterfall, the only sound.

The next morning as we sit in meditation, my lowered gaze is filled with Rinchen's motionless form—the horizontal base, knee to knee, and the upright torso with hands forming a circle, the cosmic mudra familiar from Buddha figures. A Buddha before me. Buddha-shaped, anyway. I am aware of myself as Buddha-shaped.

In the final writing period before the end of our retreat, I come to a stopping place, put away my notebook and pencil, and go out onto the porch, looking into the treetops. Soon, summer will screen the view of the waterfall with foliage. But not the sound. It will vary, from a burble to a soft roar of white noise, but the sound of falling water is heard year-round.

Now in late April, the forest is revealed in all its ongoingness. Trees toppled in a winter ice storm pierce the space with fractured trunks, and the ground is littered with limbs. A few dogwood blossoms still fleck the woods with brilliant white, but most are past their peak. Against the dark evergreen background, the pink-yellow fuzz and slick maroon of new oak and maple leaves suggest a tapestry, woven on trunks and branches splotched with moss and lichen, pale green in the damp. This forest lives much of its life veiled in rain and mist.

I think about forest monks in the Buddhist tradition, their rainy season retreats, their Bo trees. We are a world away from that; renunciates we are not. And yet there is a thread of intent linking them and us. Who are we? We are on the path to awakening.