

It was a high-status job, but only within the bounds of the monastery. In there, if you held the title BENJI, you were somebody. That's remarkable in a place where the clothes, the schedule, and most of the forms of daily life were oriented toward everyone being pretty equally nobody. If you were the BENJI though, you had a special seat in the meditation hall, next to the Head Monk. You could be invited to staff meetings. When the Abbot was resident, you might be invited to the elegant tea at his place after morning rituals. You played a significant role in any number of ceremonies. People might cut you a bit of slack with regard to timing, because you had a lot to do. Where the Head Monk went, you went. You were his or her attendant; you were the BENJI.

In point of fact, though, you were the garbage-man. You dealt with that. That's what people—especially your friends—called you, the garbageman. There were disgusting aspects to it, of course. If kitchen compost sat too long, or in warm weather, it would stink. The garden crew helped with those containers sometimes, taking them to the garden, sometimes even washing them, sometimes returning them. With its emphasis on precision and tidiness, Zen practice did not lead to, nor tolerate, messy garbage areas for very long. Thus the containers in the kitchen, the dorms, the bathrooms and the other places stayed mostly OK. The contents did have to be sorted. Primarily, this meant into Burnable and Unburnable. Opinions varied about what was burnable. Our monastery sat at the conclusion of a 14-mile-long dirt road through a national wilderness area, and in the 1970's, we considered a lot of things burnable. Plastic, for instance.

Smoke rising from the Burnable can could be quite foul, but the garbage-man had to stay close to it, vigilant, because, well...national wilderness area, 14-mile-dirt road, and a coastal shrub ecology that loved to burn. Fire was, is, and always has been, integral to the health of local flora; but a forest fire is obviously not good for the monastery. If we

started a fire in the middle of the nowhere we were in, it would mean a dreadful conversation with the Forest Service. Lighting and foolish campers started enough of those.

In cool or dark weather, it felt good to stand by that 50-gallon drum with its cross-hatched iron-grate lid. It was difficult though in the baking sun. No shade could be found because there was no structure near the Burnable can. It sat raised from the ground on a low, broad, concrete platform, in the middle of an open area near the creek. The can was punctured with a square vent at its bottom, to draw air. When burnables were on fire in there, the only thing nearby was the garbage-man, and his shovel. Even afterwards, when ash filled the lower part of can, the BENJI still had to go past from time to time, to stir it and check.

The job was physically demanding. The big Brute containers in the kitchen—they were about hip high, and most of a meter across at the top—did not make their way down and up the back stairs on their own. Someone had to carry them. Same with the knee-high compost buckets: if the gardeners didn't get them, that was my work.

Some BENJI s before my time, and some who came after, used an old, wheezing, pick-up truck to move the Brute containers around. I did not, because I disliked that. The bed of our pickup was relatively high, which meant more lifting. And there was really only one wide earthen path through the heart of the monastery. Starting downstream, where it intersected the creek, the path ran up through the middle of the main housing area, across a short bridge over a second creek, then alongside the central buildings—dining room, dorm, kitchen, meditation hall, library— on past the guest housing, and the baths, and out toward an empty, undeveloped part of the property, where it gave out. My objections to the truck were that it was a loud machine; that there were small

children running around; and that we were after all, living in a monastery. Most of the forms and schedules we used, the clothes we wore for meditation, and the diet upon which we subsisted, dated back to feudal Japan. The truck, more than the small children, seemed out of place; it was certainly an anachronism.

There was also an alternative: Gardenway carts. These had come onto the market not too long before, part of a blooming desire for high-end gardening merchandise. The carts worked like wheelbarrows, except that instead of having one low wheel up front, the carts had two large wheels, multi-spoked, like the kind you see on bicycles. This meant they didn't tip side-to-side. Where the hollowed-out metal bed of a wheelbarrow sat, Gardenway carts had a wide light-weight plywood box, open at the back and on top. You could put a lot in there; several Brutes at a time fit perfectly. It was possible to overload the carts, and I frequently did, but even so, the wheels turned easily, and the clever design put most of the burden over the axle, instead of in the hands and arms of the driver. There were three or four of these carts at the monastery, and I competed for them with the garden crew, and in summer, with the house-keeping crew as well. Pushing these around all day, or pulling them—you could haul them behind you like a rickshaw driver—made a person tired.

The garbage-man had to load the Brutes into the carts, transport them, and unload them, and then wash them before taking them back. The washing could sometimes be done in the creeks. I held the BENJI job for eight months—from the beginning of January through the end of August. The creeks ran full and fast in winter; they could rise suddenly in a spring storm, but like so many California streams, they slowed and dried out as the warm weather came, and they all but disappeared in summer heat. While they were running though, it was often possible to find a place to clamber down to the water's edge. There, I'd use a long-handled brush to scrub the containers. I had to be

careful not to let them fill too quickly, or they'd be dragged from me, and float off until they stuck on a protruding rock, or branch, or boulder. I would eventually win all the wrestling matches required to get the Brutes out of the streams, but my pants and boots suffered in the doing.

It wasn't possible to use the creeks for washing from early summer on. Apart from there being less water, there were also paying guests in the monastery. It cost the guests quite a bit to be there—away from the cities, in nature, with streams, and pools, and thermal baths they could soak in, and places they could sun themselves, and dip into water of various temperatures, and sun themselves some more. They wouldn't want to be frolicking in garbage-can wash-water. They wouldn't want to think about that.

Physical work wasn't the only thing causing tiredness; it was also the centuries old Zen skepticism (it seemed) about sleep. The clock ran a little longer than 6 hours, from the lights-out signal at 9:20 pm, to the wake-up bell, which began near 3:30 am. Some of us had duties that kept us up a little later, or required us to get up a bit earlier, but basically we all went around every day with six hours sleep. Perfectly OK in an environment where there was little outside distraction—no phone, no television, no media of any kind, apart from irregular deliveries of paper mail—and a large daily dose of meditation. We sat a minimum of 80 minutes each day; the normal schedule had 200 minutes of meditation in it—five 40-minute periods.

The schedule reduced the anxiety of decision as well. We very rarely had to worry about a plan for the day, though there were two days out of ten with some unstructured time in them. This allowed for laundry, mending, head-shaving, a short hike, or a nap. Exploratory hikes might take us into nature, but we never left the monastery for another place. We fundamentally all did everything at the same time, and in the same way.

Meals, bathing, work, study, and religious devotions were all infused with ritual; if the schedule wasn't exactly restful, it was at least very regular. We did not tend to get sick. From a laborer's point of view, ours was a luxurious life. For someone trying to walk the Buddhist path, it was like training camp. But if you followed the schedule, if you went along with the plan, it all kind of worked. Adding hard physical labor though upset the balance.

The place most of us caught up on sleep was in the zendo, the meditation hall. During meditation. If you had been practicing it for some years, then meditation became familiar, the opposite of exotic. The posture too could get quite comfortable, especially if you were tidily wrapped up in robes. It was usually dark outside during our sitting times; and the deep mountain valley, draining the hills to the creek outside the zendo, sharpened the bite of the damp and cold. Thus your pillow in the dim, dry, fragrant hall could appear as a kind of sensual refuge. Kerosene lamps, the slow, mournful gong of temple bells...a person could easily drift into a snooze. The classical remedy, again dating back centuries (or even millenia, if the Indian sources are to be believed) was the stick-carrying hall monitor.

We took turns in this role, patrolling the zendo for most of the time, most periods, and whacking sleepy meditators back into alertness. It wasn't brutal. The ritual was polite: the monitor would first lay the flattened end of the stick on a sleeper's shoulder. That person, when they became aware of it, would bring their palms together, and bow, conveying the message, "Ah, thank you for noticing that I've been asleep, wasting my time in dreams instead of meditating. Please assist me further by hitting me a good one on each shoulder. Here's the first shoulder." The sleepy-head would then present the monitor a mostly horizontal back and shoulder, bending forward and to the left, then forward and to the right. The monitor—we used the Japanese term, JUNKO—would

indeed try to hit them a good loud shot on each shoulder, aiming for the area between the shoulder bone and neck. If it was done right, it didn't hurt. It was loud and startling. It was supposed to release any holding in the upper back, like an instant massage. The sound was supposed to help awaken others.

It wasn't always done well. There was risk in it for the JUNKO too: if you hit someone wrong, you felt terrible, but of course there was no talking in the zendo. No excuse, no apology was possible. You both simply bowed to one another again, as the ritual prescribed, and went on down the row. But everyone could hear from the sound of the impact whether the blow had been a clean one or not. Some people—I'm thinking of one inveterate, sneaky, zendo sleeper, a female—had almost no shoulders, or very, very narrow ones. A good hit on her had to be extremely accurate. I was less than accurate one morning, and when I came around again, she had big tears on her cheeks. These might not have been caused by pain though, but rather by all the emotions that might attach to being loudly (if briefly) beaten. Despite explanation that every sitter—even a sleepy one—was Buddha; and every hall monitor was Manjuśhri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, carrying a flaming sword of prajña; despite deep bows from both parties before and after, it was still a hard, loud, public hit, and it brought up a lot. Goodness knows what kind of baggage we were all carrying.

During my time as BENJI, I got hit a fair amount. I didn't mind, I guess because I understood why, and because nothing could really be done about it. It just didn't bother me that much. Once though, during a week of intensification—a *sesshin*—when work and study periods were suspended for nearly everyone, and the schedule was meditation all day long, with extra periods added in the early morning and again at the end of the day, I got frustrated. People still made garbage, and the BENJI still had to deal with it. In fact the kitchen may have produced more garbage during sesshin than

during the regular practice-period days. The waste baskets in the bathrooms may have filled even more quickly. The BENJI had just as much work as ever, but less time to accomplish it. We were all getting less sleep. The brisk meals seemed farther apart from one another than they normally did. Thus I was, as we all were, tired and hungry; but I was also bodily worn-out from work. I found it impossible to stay awake in meditation. It seemed I was taking care of everyone's garbage, and getting hit more than ever for it. It certainly did not feel fair, especially for a high-status position. I may have let roll a private tear or two of self-pity at the injustice.

The incident I want to relate did not take place during sesshin, though for some reason, I was out and about on that day, while most other people were either in the zendo or engaged in administration. "Out and about" does not mean what the phrase might imply in town: I was no flâneur strolling for pleasure, or window-shopping. I mean only that I was walking, moving in fresh air, relatively unimpeded. Specifically, I was pushing about 80 gallons of human waste, contained in two big Brutes, loaded into a Gardenway cart. The same sociological impulse that brought us Gardenway carts, and a retro-high-tech approach to ecology, had also brought us compost toilets.

The Abbot counted among his large and illustrious circle of friends a couple who were enthusiastic proponents of this movement, so to speak. At their instance, the Abbot had seen how conditions both at our isolated mountain-valley monastery, and at our coastal biodynamic farm, were ideal for compost-toilet technology. We would be able to diminish the stress on our antiquated septic systems, and, eventually, enrich the soils with our purified, composted, organic nutrients. It would take work. The initiative would require patience, and a properly isolated location for secondary, and even tertiary composting. At the monastery, we certainly had time. We practiced patience. We were surrounded by miles and miles of uninhabited forest. Because the carpentry crew

was constantly building things—an elegant two-seater shed housing the compost toilets, for example—we had a steady supply of sawdust. Sawdust was an essential ingredient.

One summer earlier, the compost-toilet couple came to the monastery to survey locations, to advise on shed construction, and to provide general education and encouragement. They called what people deposited “a fluff.” There would be a fluff, toilet paper, and a coffee-can full of sawdust added by each user. This would go down a chute, into one of the large Brutes. Men would send fluid waste down a separate chute; women would let theirs go in with the fluffs. When the Brutes were sufficiently full, they would be switched out for a fresh set, and taken away to the composting trenches. These had been dug with a back-hoe, and were about a meter deep and ten meters long. They were lined on the sides with cinderblock that rose above the ground another meter. Two such trenches ran parallel to one another, the idea being that when the material in trench one had composted long enough—a year?— it would be turned into trench two, where it would compost for another long stretch.

The trenches lay about 300 meters upstream from the monastery’s central buildings, in an area we called The Flats, (short for its earlier name, Rattlesnake Flats.) This broad, sandy field, littered with boulders and down wood, seemed to be a small alluvial plain bordered on one side by the creek, and on the other side, by a semi-circle of steep hills, technically, a hogback. We called it the Hogback. It took about 10 minutes to walk out there, longer if you were pushing a loaded cart. The trenches had been discreetly dug neither too close to the water—the creek flowed from there down along one side of the monastery—nor too close to the path that led up to the Founder’s Memorial Stone, on the Hogback.



As BENJI my work consisted in going down below the compost-toilet seats to the bricked-in area where the Brutes stood. I had to get them out, close them up, replace them with empties, and drag the full ones up a steep slope to the waiting Gardenway cart. Out at The Flats, I would peel back the layer of black plastic covering the working pile, add new material, cover it by shovelling on dirt, then replace the plastic, securing it with rocks and spare tires. Obviously, the Brutes and lids needed to be washed, and equally obviously, not in the creek. There was a standpipe though, providentially located off the trail, about half-way out to The Flats. At the time, it marked the end of the line for human efforts at plumbing.

(The original reason people came to this place, inland about 10 miles from the ocean, was the hot springs that bubbled up through geological faults. Native Americans had been coming for who knows how long, and eventually white people—enabled by Chinese labor—came too, to bathe in and drink the waters. They built a hotel and a saloon, and attracted vacationers and health seekers of all kinds. The springs smelled strongly of sulphur, but the hot water was thought to be beneficial for the digestion, and the muscles. So there had been some kind of plumbing for about 100 years, when I took over the BENJI job.)

I used the water from the standpipe to wash the hell out of the compost-toilet Brutes, scrubbing them with another long-handled brush that I used only for that. I did the lids as well, and left all these things to dry overturned on a pallet by the standpipe, behind some ceanothus bushes. There were normally a few days before these Brutes needed to go back into service. Eventually I'd collect them, and store them out of site by the lower level of the compost-toilets. I never stacked or nested any of these, even if they were very clean, and I assiduously kept them apart from other similar-sized containers. It was an effective system, if a laborious one.

This particular day, I was going across the intersection where the extension of the dirt road leading to our place ended, meeting the main lane through the monastery in a T. The outer road descended steep hills before arriving at our entrance, which we'd built out with a Torii-style gate, a fence, and a little booth, for someone to be in during Guest Season. Foot traffic could pass through the entrance pretty easily, but what we'd built blocked vehicles, unless they belonged to the monastery. Others mostly stayed outside.

As I proceeded behind the Gardenway cart, I heard the crunch of car-tires on the gravel up outside the gate. Thinking it might be one of our shop trucks, I set down the cart and went to see who was driving what, and if they needed any help opening the gate. To my amazement, as I got closer, I saw an ordinary, black, 4-door sedan out there, rolling to a smoky stop in the dust. (The long descent was famously hard on brakes.)

This never happened. It was extremely rare that any car came down that road by accident, especially in the autumn or spring. It wasn't much more than a glorified wagon trail: plain dirt, narrow, rutted and ridged and entirely rural. The prior stop with any population was 14 miles away; that consisted of one or two dwellings by the road, and a very few others scattered around in the forest. From there, the road rose in switchbacks and washboard straightaways for six miles, ran a distance along the top of a ridge, and came snaking down, sometimes very steeply, for eight more miles. If someone had made it to our Torii gate, they had meant to. As far as I knew, we were not expecting any visitors. I did not know very far, it tuned out.

Woven into our style of practice was a strong sense of "container"—inside distinguished from outside. Once you came inside—inside the monastery, inside the meditation hall, inside the kitchen or the Abbot's cabin—certain rules applied; outside was something else. Corollary to this and connected to it, were duties of protection.

During the summer for example, a person—and this rotated among us all, women and men—slept every night in the gate-house, up here by the road. Someone else slept at the entrance to the baths; yet another person slept in the meditation hall. Even during the off-season, in a practice period like we were in, someone went around each night clacking together wooden blocks to signal lights-out, and to let anyone outside the monastery know that someone inside it was awake. In the isolated country, this was all mostly ritual. In the city centre, located in a dangerous neighborhood, the protection jobs carried real meaning. There were threats: break-ins, robberies, muggings. Everyone at the monastery had spent at least six months practicing in the city before coming out here, and despite the minimal sleep, we were, as a population, pretty alert.

I watched from inside the fence as a man got out of the car. Though I recognized him, I felt no great urge to run greet him. He looked tough, for one thing, and he was reputed to *be* tough. Shaved head, (like mine but different) sunglasses, suit but no tie. He was not tall, though I would never have said in his presence that he was short. Nearly as famous in California as his sidekick, this was Jacques Barzaghi. He'd climbed out of the driver's seat. Which meant that the trim, elegant man now getting out of the back seat, seeming to bristle with intelligence and darting perception, was Governor Jerry Brown, highest state official for all the land around us, and very much more. Gov. Brown was in some real sense the boss of the earth I stood on. Zen temples had famously disputed this through the centuries, adding the suffix "mountain" to their name, hoping thereby to express their independence from the laws of the lowlands, the cities. How that had worked out is an open question. In any case, our current Governor had come to this mountain.

So I went out to say hello, and to see how I could be of service. Barzaghi approached. I was distracted from him, from his walking towards me and speaking, by the third

person emerging from the back seat. Her I *definitely* knew. The slender, pretty brunette in a silky dress being helped from the car by the Governor, now shading her eyes against the late morning sun as it came over the ridge, was Linda Ronstadt. The only words that came to mind were, "O my god."

Barzaghi said they'd like to see the Abbot; they were there to see him. I told him of course, that I would just run go get things started, right away...if they didn't mind waiting a second, I'd make sure the proper people came up to see them. They did not seem rushed. Like most people who've come over the road—an hour's drive for the 14 miles—they appeared content to just stand there with their feet on bottom ground—no cliffs or drop-offs in sight. They were simply having a moment, taking in the colors, listening to the big, sudden silence, smelling the sulphur.

I left our visitors and went for help: I had to get word to the Abbot; if I could, I had to find the Guest Manager. I'd never understood why that position was technically one of the monastery's Big Six—there was usually nothing to do outside the Guest season, except maybe order new sheets for next year, and do inventory—until like now, suddenly there was. We all switched jobs regularly—nearly every practice period—so we were all familiar with them, and we knew who was doing what. We didn't always know where to find them. As soon as the right people were informed, I went back to my Gardenway cart. I took a grip on the handle, cast a glance up at the road, and went on with my work. I'm sure that the Governor, his beautiful consort, and Mr Barzaghi were seen to appropriately. But I wouldn't know. I was out at Rattlesnake Flats, shoveling.

Next morning though, I had to spend some time breaking up and flattening cardboard boxes; these we stacked and bundled and trucked out over the road to recycle. The Head Cook had told me there was a real mountain of them out behind the kitchen.

She'd said they were an eyesore, if not an outright fire hazard. So after burning the burnables, I headed to the open area behind the kitchen, stopping for a drink of water by the coffee machine. To my astonishment, there stood Linda Ronstadt, alone, dangling a bag of tea in a cup of hot water. She raised and lowered it in the cup. I got my water.

Excuse me. I'm so sorry to bother you. I just had to say, to tell you, that I'm a huge fan. Of your music.

She looked at me. She really did, with those big eyes. There was eye contact.

Thank you. It's very sweet of you to say so.

We both nodded.

That was it.

Down by the creek, at the bottom of the valley, in the middle of the mountains, in Los Padres National Forest, there was nothing more to say. If there was, I couldn't think of it.

I heard later from the Abbot's assistant, that Linda Ronstadt liked our location. She'd told her, apparently, that it was the most romantic place she'd ever been; she'd said, in fact, that a person could fall in love there with Attila the Hun. My estimation of the Governor rose. I don't know about Attila, but as I staggered off to do the boxes, my heart was pounding, my eyes were misting up and out of focus, and I was having trouble breathing. I was exhibiting *all* the symptoms.