

Lost and Found in the Ventana Wilderness by Andrew Atkeison

The fall of 2012 was the last time I saw Blanche Hartman, the Grande Dame of American Soto Zen. Many years had passed since the days of the 1970's when we practiced together at the Berkeley Zendo. As we talked, Blanche slowly recalled who I was, and I refreshed her memory. We talked for a while together about the old days when we were both at Tassajara for a summer guest season in 1975. For brief moments, it was as if that invisible line between the three worlds in Buddhism, past, present and future had been suspended. Blanche laughed as a young woman would when she recalled those days and I laughed along with her.

"Do you remember the time when we went searching for that guy who was lost out in the wilderness?" I asked.

She gave me a rather blank stare. "No" she said, "please tell me the story."

"OK," I replied, "I'll tell it to the best of my ability."

It was mid-summer at Tassajara and the morning air was crisp and cool as the sun began to rise over the ridge. Later it would be a scorching hot day. The wooden blocks (hyoshigi or kaishaku) that are clapped together to signal time were striking their last roll down for the work meeting. Beneath the shade of the Tan oaks and Sycamore, about twenty of us residents stood in a circle around the work leader waiting for our work assignments for the day.

At the meeting, the mood seemed rather somber. That day we would not work our regular shifts. The previous day, a visitor had become lost while hiking and had not returned in the evening. He had been lost out in the wilderness for over twenty-four hours. I shuddered at how one more hot dry day without water and another cold night of exposure would slowly wear a person down. I thought about the vow that we take as Mahayana Buddhists; the bodhisattva vow to save all beings. *It seems impossible. What does it really mean?* I had no idea.

During the work meeting we were paired together to go out in search parties. My search partner was Blanche. Each search party was assigned a different area to cover. Blanche and I were to follow Tassajara creek upstream. We were to call out every five or ten minutes and listen for a response. One had to be in good shape to hike these rugged mountains. The topography was perilous and there were many natural dangers hidden within these wild and unforgiving mountains. I thought of the words of Dogen Zenji, the renowned philosopher of Japan and founder of Soto Zen. "*There are rivers hidden within mountains, there are mountains hidden within mountains and there are mountains hidden within hiddenness.*" It was an apt description of the Ventana wilderness surrounding Tassajara.

Blanche and I set out upstream, bringing with us canteens of water and also bag lunches. As we hiked and talked, I found out, coincidentally, that, like me, she had been raised on a farm in Alabama. She was a good hiker and it was reassuring in this treacherous terrain to be walking with someone that I knew was capable. Before coming to Tassajara I had spent several years in the mountains of Mexico, South America and Oregon. The mountains were my territory and the place where I excelled far beyond the average. A lot of fellow Zen students at Tassajara were from the city. I thought of them as city-slickers. They were good at certain things, but put them out in the wild and they were almost helpless. I was again reminded of Dogen Zenji's words in the Genjo Koan: "Each to their own element. A bird's element is the sky, take a bird out of the sky and it will perish. A fish's element is the water, take a fish out of the water and it will die." I thought, *how true that is with human beings too.* Blanche did not seem out of her element at all in these rugged mountains; she was tough. I felt reassured that we could rely on each other.

I was wearing Redwing work boots, which my wife, Edit, had given me when we first came to Tassajara the previous year. I could feel their sturdy soles gripping the surface as I jumped from rock to rock in the stream bed. I cherished the unexpected freedom of being out in the mountains instead of having to follow the monotonous monastic routine.

As I continued telling the story, a faint smile came over Blanche's face as she began to recall those days long ago at Tassajara.

We pushed on up-stream, calling out, "helloo" frequently but hearing no reply. Only the sound of the rushing water filled the void. After a while that concentrated sound of flowing water really got into my head and started echoing around. High up in the sky, silhouetted against the sun, a red tailed hawk circled. Its piercing cry sliced down into the canyon like the sharpness of its talons. Small animals and birds scurried fearfully seeking cover. Blanche and I carefully traversed the slippery boulders of the creek bed. "Halloo!" To save our voices, we took turns calling out, and then we would pause and listen. No sound came back except that of the flowing water both inside and outside of my head. Again and again we called out without receiving any response. We continued along like this, working our way carefully upstream among the slippery boulders.

Sometime after the sun crossed its apex, we sat down for lunch. It felt cool and refreshing down in the creek bed but up on the canyon walls, the sun shone relentlessly. Sharp chaparral, thick underbrush and loose stones made the steep canyon walls dangerously impassable. This was the home of rattle snakes, lizards, tarantulas, scorpions and the ever-present blue jays and ravens.

We must have gone quite a few miles upstream, because the canyon walls seemed to be closing in and getting steeper while the creek bed narrowed. We must be getting near the headwaters, I thought; the confluence of where several streams join to form Tassajara creek. I had seen this area on a map but I had never been this far upstream before, now things were getting interesting.

"It's late," Blanche said after we finished our lunch. "I think we should stop here and head back so we can be there before dark." I had wanted to keep going to see what the headwaters looked like but Blanche was my superior so I followed her direction. We turned around and headed back downstream still continuing to call out as we went and still getting no response.

In the steep mountain terrain, the sun sets much earlier without a long period of twilight. It was getting dark quickly down in the canyon and we were still at least a mile out from Tassajara. Not having given up yet, I kept calling out, "helloo!" along the way and waiting. By now I was expecting only the sound of the stream but this time it was different. After a brief moment, I could hear a faint call coming back.

"Helloo."

I turned to Blanche in disbelief. "Did you hear that, Blanche?"

"No."

"Listen," I replied as I called out again, "helloo!"

There was a pause as my voice echoed through the mountains and then faintly, an audible call came back in the distance: "Helloo."

This time Blanche heard it too. We were excited. "It's him, it's got to be him," we agreed.

I quickly reviewed in my mind the route we had taken that day. We had hiked much too far upstream: we must have passed him in the morning. The sound of the rushing water probably

obscured his call. I felt like Blanche and I had hit the jackpot. Of all the people sent out that morning to search, we were the ones who had located where he was. Saving someone's life was a euphoric feeling but little did I realize how premature my musings were.

We decided that Blanche would continue on back to Tassajara and I would go back towards where we heard the call coming from. If there was enough light left, I would try to reach him before nightfall. Once Blanche got back, they would send out a fresh search party equipped with flashlights and drinking water. That sounded like a good plan. I turned around and headed back upstream while Blanche continued on down towards Tassajara. With darkness coming on, I had to move quickly; there was no time to spare.

Energized now, I walked briskly about a half a mile back upstream with the lost hiker continuing to answer my calls. Judging from the direction of his calls, I came to a place where he must have veered off the main course of the stream bed and apparently, somehow and for some unknown reason, hiked straight up the steep canyon wall. His voice sounded much louder now and was coming from a ninety-degree angle to my right. I had no choice but to go up that unstable forbidding canyon wall to find him.

As I began the ascent, my boots dug deeply into the slippery shale. I grasped onto hanging branches to pull myself up. Every few yards, I would rest a moment and look for the next place where I could get a purchase and pull up farther. Finally I reached a kind of flat rocky plateau. His voice sounded quite close by then, but the tangle of thorny chaparral was so thick that I could only see a short distance into it. He had to be in there: his voice sounded only a few yards away. I crawled beneath the low canopy of sharp brush until I came to a place that was a sudden drop off. It was the edge of a precipice obscured almost completely by the dense chaparral. I looked over the edge and there he was. A thin, frail, longhaired young guy, a kid really. He was clinging to a large tree root growing out from the rocky wall. He was located about eight feet down from the cliff's edge. That tree root he was on had saved him from falling to a certain death into the rocky abyss below.

He stared up at me blankly, looking disoriented and confused. "My glasses," he whimpered, "I lost them when I fell. I can't see anything." He was a mess both mentally and physically.

"OK, all right," I said, "just hang in there."

I lay down flat on my stomach, hooking my feet to the trunks of some Manzanita bushes to keep from falling over the edge as I leaned down as far as I could, but there were still a few feet separating us.

"Listen," I said unsympathetically, "pull yourself together. You've got to climb up that tree root until you can grasp my wrist, OK?" He looked scared to move from his relatively safe position. "Come on," I said impatiently, "get on with it. There is no time to waste; it's getting dark." He whimpered a little bit more but did as I ordered and slowly moved up the root till I was able to lock my grip onto his wrist. I had him then, I was strong and I pulled him up over the cliff's edge to safety quite easily. With the adrenalin coursing through my body, he felt light as a feather. We sat there huddled together underneath the thorny canopy and took a breather. Suddenly I felt the fatigue coming on as I handed him the canteen. He guzzled the water wildly like someone in a western movie stranded in the desert. I grabbed the canteen away. He made those whining noises again, but when he had calmed down a bit, I gave it back and told him to drink slowly. He seemed thankful for the water, but I still couldn't believe how helpless he was. This was definitely someone who was out of his element.

"Why in the world did you hike up this ridge?" I asked him.

He replied weakly, "I took acid (LSD) and decided to take a short cut back." It seemed really crazy to take a short cut out in this kind of wilderness, especially up the steep canyon wall, which was certainly no short cut. To me, he was obviously another city-slicker. There was no time, though, to be astounded by these things. We still had to somehow find our way back in the encroaching darkness. As I turned around to begin our way out of the thicket, he tugged at my pants leg. "Uh, can I borrow your boots?" he asked.

"What?" I replied incredulously, glaring at him in disgust.

"Uh, will you trade me your boots for my zories?" he said, pointing to the torn pink plastic sandals on his scratched up feet.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, since without my boots I couldn't have found him in the first place. "Forget it, man. There's no way I'm trading you my boots for your zories," I said unsympathetically. "Now let's get moving." He looked down, dejected. I softened a little, adding, "Now listen, you ought to be happy to be alive. We've got to get going. Follow close behind and I'll crush down the chaparral for you." He stayed right behind me, clinging to the pants leg of my blue jeans. Together we crawled back through the underbrush the way I had come in.

Night had come on quickly, and it was pitch black dark when we got to the canyon edge. I could hear the sound of the stream again. It sounded like it was several hundred feet below. Carefully, I began our descent down the unstable canyon wall. Rocks and shale crumbled away beneath my boots as we went. I held tightly onto the kid's wrist in case he slipped. Finally, we came to a place on a ledge where we could go no farther. Without a flashlight it was impossible to see any safe path down, so we sat down there in the dust and darkness to wait for the search party.

The summer air was warm and balmy and the mountain had provided a safe place to wait. The kid wasn't much of a conversationalist and I was pretty disgusted with him by then anyway, so I entered into the vastness of my thoughts. *Back at Tassajara they would be sitting evening Zazen in the comfortable zendo. My mind went to the hot baths. How nice it would be to be following the boring monastic schedule instead of out on this dusty ledge in the darkness with this uninteresting and pathetic kid. Well, it was OK, actually, because the evening was warm and comfortable and we were safe as long as we didn't move about.* I began to relax from all the stress and reclined against some rocks that were still warm from the afternoon sun. There was nothing to do but wait.

After a while I could hear voices far away in the distance, and soon the lights of the search party came bobbing into view. They were slowly winding their way along the creek bed down below in the canyon. We called out to each other, "Heyy," as they progressed. It was good to see their lights weaving along below, but there was still this matter of being stuck high on this ledge with no obvious way down.

"Heyy," a familiar voice called out robustly from below. I could tell it was my friend David Chadwick, the director of Tassajara at the time. David is a very gregarious guy who is undaunted by difficult situations. It was good to hear his stout voice, the very embodiment of boldness.

"Heyy, David," I called back. "Glad you're here. I've got him. He's OK, but we can't get down: I don't have a flashlight." The kid was perking up; he looked much more optimistic than before.

"OK, all right," David replied, "stay right there. I'm coming up."

Stay right there? I thought. What other choice do we have anyway, and how the hell is he going to get up here in the dark?

I couldn't believe it, but it sounded like David was starting up the cliff without taking any time to search for a safe way up. I could see his flashlight moving around; he was coming straight up the cliff wall. Somehow in his fearlessness, he had found a good way up. Soon, huffing and puffing, David appeared and crawled up onto the ledge. He sat down with us in the dust and leaned back against the rock wall of the mountain with me.

He greeted the kid cheerfully, held out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm David," and then turned to me and said, "Hey, man, you got a cigarette?"

After such a long and arduous day, I laughed in relief. I replied, "David, did you climb all the way up here just to bum a cigarette?"

"Yeah," he replied, "you got one?"

I pulled out a bag of rolling tobacco. We sat there for a moment, rolled up and smoked our cigarettes while the search party milled about impatiently below. They wanted to get back, but they had no choice, David was the director.

As we sat there enjoying our cigarettes, the kid tapped David on the shoulder. "Uh, can I borrow your shoes?" he asked. "I'll trade you my zories." I found it irritating that after all the hours and energy spent saving this guy, he would be so ungrateful as to further impose on us in this self-centered way.

"Sure," replied David, without a moment's hesitation, "thank you. Zories will be fine."

I thought about how I had refused the kid my boots. *Was I the one being self-centered? What was the meaning of saving all beings?* The bodhisattva vow was not any clearer to me then than before.

After finishing our cigarettes, we carefully climbed down the canyon wall the way David had come up. The search party was anxious to get going and we made it back to Tassajara that evening.

All was well that ended well.

Blanche smiled sweetly and said, "Yes, I do remember, thank you for sharing that."

That was the last time I saw her. Having lived a full life, Blanche passed away peacefully in 2015.