

## Walking with Dōgen

(An excerpt from *Breakfast with Salamanders: Seasons on the Appalachian Trail*)

*March 2008.* The snow flurries start almost as soon as Dawn turns back after walking the first half mile with me. It's the last week of March, a few days after the vernal equinox, but winter has not yet given in, even here in Davenport Gap, just north of the Great Smoky Mountains. The maple trees have yet to leaf in, though Dawn spotted an early violet at the trailhead. Again I will walk the North Carolina-Tennessee line, heading north 123 miles to Iron Mountain Gap. The streams are running well but still easy to cross, snowflakes float through the bare woods, and the cold stays in the pleasant range until the top of Snowbird Mountain, at over 4,000 feet, when the winds whip up and the snowfall thickens. I skip lunch, pull on my rain parka and hiking gloves, and move quickly down the mountain toward shelter as a good inch of snow builds up underfoot, something I never anticipated, but easy enough to manage with a hiking stick I pull from the woods. At 3:30 a small crowd of thruhikers has already gathered at Groundhog Creek Shelter in Deep Gap. That's when I pick up my new, and first legitimate, trail name.

According to best AT custom, a trail name should not be chosen but bestowed, spontaneously, by another distance hiker. (A custom often ignored.) So after passing for several years as Cascader, I decide before this hike to drop my self-chosen alias and just see what happens. It does not take long. One of the thruhikers, a middle-aged woman, asks me my trail name and I tell her, "I don't have one, but you can call me Al." She turns and shouts out to the others, busy building a fire, "Hey, everybody, this is Call Me Al." Perfect. For the rest of my AT hiking days, when anyone asks my name, I'll be able to say "I'm Call Me Al. Or, you can just call me Al."

I get plenty of chances to practice as one after another hiker arrives out of the snow until the shelter fills and a handful of tents pop up around it. Most are thruhikers who started at Springer Mountain, 250 miles back, in late February—hiking many days in the snow. Statistically, up to half of these will never finish the Trail and I'm struck by the greenness of some, who may never have backpacked or spent a night in the woods before a few weeks ago. As questions come up, about gear, about the Trail up ahead, about basic woodcraft, and I keep answering them, one of them, a tall, bearded forty year old with a booming voice, asks me just how I know all this. And I realize I've already hiked over seven hundred miles of the AT, making me the old hand among a crowd of rookies. Though I'm careful not to point this out—in fact, I hold my tongue for the rest of the evening. At night, as the temperature falls to 20 degrees, a barred owl and a great horned owl take turns hooting from the woods. Later, I wake up to a hellish racket as a nightjar calls out *chuck-will's-widow*, swoops to the ground, and then fights for its life against some mistaken prey turned predator, a fox or a weasel. Uncanny screams fill the air for a few long minutes, then utter silence.

After another inch of snow overnight the woods glisten, fresh white powder on the ground, on the bare trees, on the glossy green leaves of the rhododendrons that start to appear now. No spring blooms as yet, no thrushes or ovenbirds calling, no stinging bugs either, but lots to enjoy, the clearing skies, the evergreen shrubs and trees (for now, just scattered hemlocks), delicate needle ice pushing up from the ground, the morning sun picking out innumerable glints in the snow. The trail climbs up Max Patch, a classic bald, with open views in every direction, then heads down steeply—I grab a new stick to keep from slipping on the snow and mud underfoot. At night, camping on top of Walnut Mountain, the stars come out brightly, mirrored below by the lights of a city glowing in the distance, probably Hot Springs, thirteen miles northeast. The night grows warmer instead of colder and by morning the snow has vanished.

The warming trend continues as the trail descends and then climbs, a thousand feet, up Bluff Mountain, then a long descent, broken by a few ups, way down to Hot Springs, almost 3,000 feet below my overnight perch. I've rented a "primitive" style cottage on the edge of Spring Creek for Dawn and me. I turn on my phone long enough to call my kids and make sure they're OK, and then call Lori in Seattle to check on Dad. Dawn arrives with my resupply in tow as I sit on the porch under the trees and we walk to the Paddler's Pub for an early dinner. Then we soak, naked, in one of the hot tubs at the mineral springs, before retiring early for a rustic evening in the cabin, the windows open to let in the breeze and the stream sounds. In the morning, after a quick breakfast, Dawn heads back to Asheville and her kitchen job while I start the long climb out of Hot Springs, about 3500 feet, as the day quickly heats up to nearly 70 degrees. Over four days of walking, the lingering winter has completely given way to summery heat.

The trail rises through long stretches of rhododendrons mixed in with stands of small, stressed-looking pines surrounded by mounds of brown needles. I pass several dry water sources and fill up at a pooled spring, not on the map, about three miles before my campsite. The trail levels for a while to pass an old tobacco field, now a nature preserve, where a bluebird flits near the house someone's built for him. Higher up, I step over bear scat and, soon after, the trace of a fox or bobcat.

Climbing in the heat quickly becomes a trudge and I find my third hiking stick of the trip just off the trail some 500 feet above Hot Springs. I like this one, a strong, slightly misshapen hardwood branch, ash or oak, knotted and just the right size and weight. I trim it some with my climbing knife and quickly become attached to it as it helps me, physically or psychologically or both, manage the steep ups and the trickier downs. By the end of the week it's like a fifth limb. It will go with me on the Trail for a thousand miles to come.

The next day the trail gets rougher and much less crowded. The whole group of thruhikers I started out with must have hunkered down in Hot Springs for an extra day or two of rest and calorie dosing. The one distance hiker I've met since then, the General, a brawny and genial ex-British commando, has probably left me ten miles behind by now. I'll have campsites all to myself for three of the next four nights. And many miles of solitary walking.

Hiking alone, up mountains, over rocky ridgelines, down into gaps, across creeks, and up again, I let myself relax into states of mind often called meditative (though I find the term "meditation" less helpful the more I engage in the activity itself). I have an unexpected guide this trip in Gary Snyder's *Practice of the Wild*, a book I've brought along for its edgy, provocative takes on concepts like nature, wilderness, and even walking itself—"That's the way to see the world: in our own bodies." But I did not expect to learn so much from Snyder's nature book about Zen Buddhism. Especially about Dōgen, one of the greatest of all the Zen ancestors and one with special affinities for Snyder, who at times all but channels him. Although Snyder's essay on Dōgen's *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* speaks most directly to this trip—challenging me to see the mountains walking—I find myself returning still more to a phrase from the *Genjō Kōan*, dropped almost casually into the end of an earlier chapter. "To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and experience themselves is awakening." What does it mean to walk fifteen or twenty miles a day without carrying yourself forward? What does it mean to stop experiencing nature so you can better appreciate the way the things of nature experience themselves?

A grouse drums from the underbrush a few feet away. Last night's big downpour has ended but mist rises from the damp forest on both sides of the ridge—the distant lines of mountains shade to blue in the haze. The rhododendron buds have grown bigger, swollen with petals still held tightly

within. High up in the trees a sharp tapping punctuates the silence as a hidden woodpecker drills for grubs. Moss gleams greenly between coarse-grained rocks, water from a spring trickles underneath. A small knot near the top of my stick rubs the beginnings of a blister just above my fourth knuckle—shifting the stick restores the feeling of smooth wood. At the shelter, at the end of a long fifteen miles, a junco scratches the earth in front of the overhang and a small cottontail creeps out from the brush to sit placidly a few feet away. Slowly the light drains from the sky as shadows mass together in the woods. Near midnight another rainstorm moves through the mountains, coyotes howling in between the squalls.

The rains continue much of the next day, giving way to periods of mist, and the springs and streams perk up. Down to just a few days of food, my backpack feels weightless again except during the steeper climbs. Despite the scattered rain, my boots and socks stay dry and my feet blissfully unblistered. Coming to another empty shelter, I rip away the tattered tarp some previous hikers have used to keep out the cold and late snow. I like the front open to the woods.

The temperature drops again, close to freezing, and the next morning brings another surprise. Walking across Big Bald the mist blows in so thickly that it turns me around and I have to backtrack until I can find the way north again. Once found, the trail descends through bare woods covered with rime ice—a fairy forest. Then a series of gentler ascents and descents on broad, level, park-like stretches of trail. By late afternoon I've covered twenty miles. Sometimes I manage to lose myself in the walking. Hiking up, I let the mountain flow down past me; the ridgelines stream by and the lines of distant mountains gather like waves. "If you doubt mountains walking," Dōgen says, "you do not know your own walking."

I find it tempting, walking with his words floating through my head, to identify with Snyder, fast becoming another of my heroes. Snyder spent much of his childhood in North Seattle, living a mile or two from the house I grew up in; like me, he learned to love the mountains by hiking and backpacking in the North Cascades and the Olympics. And like mine, his interest in Zen Buddhism began at an early age, in my case at seventeen, in Snyder's as an undergraduate at Reed. That interest took both of us to the Bay Area as young men, Snyder to the Asian Studies program at Berkeley, me to the San Francisco Zen Center. But there the similarities end. While Snyder went on to spend several years in Japanese monasteries and then devote his adulthood to poetry, activism, nature writing, and his own eclectic, deeply serious form of Zen practice, I spent a little less than a year at the Zen Center before leaving in despair. It took me three decades to find my way back to formal Zen practice, half a lifetime.

Yet here I was, walking with Snyder, walking with Dōgen, walking with the mountains walking.

The next day, an easy ten and a half miles, I stop at the bottom of a deep gap at Uncle Johnny's hostel on the Nolicucky River—Uncle Johnny himself rents me a towel and leads me to the shower stalls. He also sells me three Snickers Bars for the archaic price of 40 cents each—after eight days in the woods, I've gotten a taste of the distance hiker's remorseless hunger. Then back into the woods through hemlocks and pines, mountain laurel and rhododendron, and the occasional bare hardwood. I take it easy and look for a stream to soak my t-shirt in. I sleep alone in the ungainly No Business Knob shelter, preferring not to camp because of all the dead trees around, widow makers poised to fall on any unsuspecting tent. At night the wind comes up and one huge snag just a few feet away groans ominously with every blast.

I hike in total solitude the next day, seeing no one at all until I reach Iron Mountain Gap, where Jim McGavran showed me a red trillium two years earlier. I arrive at 4:25, five minutes before I asked Dawn to meet me, and she pulls up fifteen minutes later. Dawn asks me about the hike, looking at me quizzically, and I tell her, guessing she will understand, "some Zen stuff was happening on the trail." She just smiles back, adding "I could see it in your eyes," and then we drop the subject and get into her car to drive back to Asheville. The weather has heated up again and we enjoy the warm North Carolina evening together, splitting a pizza and drinking the local ale, celebrating the first day of April.