

PART FOUR

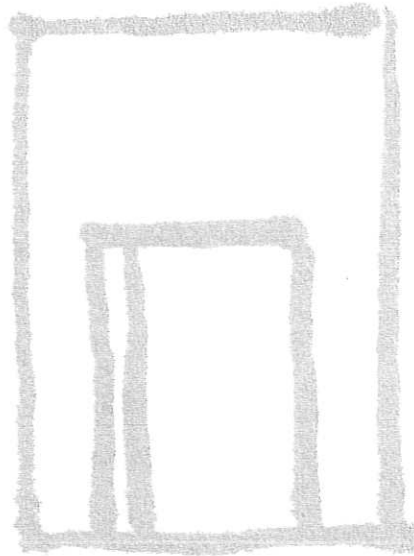
Outside Surroundings

This late August day—

together on the same branch,

dead leaves and live ones.

The One Who Listens



Near the open door of Zen Center's dining room, someone has swept together a mixed pile of dust, grit, crumbs, and sunlight. Only by the broom following a dozen varying paths was this convergence achieved. The sunlight seems to spill forward and flow across the floor like water. And in my imagination, I envision Sa-

hasrabhujavalokitesvara, another manifestation of the thousand-armed Kannon, holding a broom in each of her hands and spinning slowly like a waterwheel.

Kannon, or Kanzeon, is the Japanese name for the Buddhist deity Avalokitesvara. This figure is the personification of compassion, the one who hears and sees all the world's suffering. In the Japanese tradition, Kannon is a figure without specific gender; however, most American Buddhists today refer to her as being female. She may have two, four, six, or as many as a thousand arms, and sometimes there is an eye in each of her hands. At other times, her hands hold work tools, household implements, musical instruments, or precious jewels. She can hold whatever you want her to, because many Buddhist teachers believe that we are, each of us, one of her useful appendages; we are the ones who live in the world and hear its suffering and are able to do what we can to help ease it. Kannon is, in her

quiet way, one of Buddhism's real heroes; she is a reminder to all who see her that it is important to listen and watch carefully, and to use whatever is at hand to provide aid and develop understanding.

Do you think of yourself as heroic? Do you see any real significance in changing a tire or in bundling together month-old newspapers? Thich Nhat Hanh once wrote in one of his journals: "Washing the dishes and cooking are themselves the path to Buddhahood. . . . Only a person who has grasped the art of cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, and chopping wood, someone who is able to laugh at the world's weapons of money, fame, and power, can hope to descend the mountain as a hero. A hero like that will traverse the waves of success and failure without rising or sinking. In fact, few people will recognize him as a hero at all."

Many people feel that they never even have the opportunity to descend the mountain at all, let alone become heroes. For them, their entire life consists of climbing and striving to reach a higher peak or plateau. And they also see themselves as being buried in an avalanche of unending routine. (But the word *routine* originally meant "a route or course of travel for trading," or "a religious pilgrimage," and has only more recently come to mean "ordinary" or "of no special quality.")

In fact, nothing in your life is ordinary. There is no ordinary breath or heartbeat; there is no ordinary force of gravity; there is no ordinary birth or death. *Natural*, yes—but never ordinary. In a certain sense, just living your life *does* engender a type of courage, especially when you're fully aware of all the others who are in it with you. Listening to your friends is sometimes not that easy to do. Lending someone a hand may interfere with your own ideas of how the day should be spent. This is why Kannon finds herself in garden settings, at crossroads, and ensconced in people's kitchens, all invaluable vantage points for gaining a broader perspective. She is with us as we hear the sounds of the world's suffering, as well as its music and its "routine" sounds of daily life. As we wash our vegetables, she hears the rustling of our actions and comes to our assistance. The work goes easier, and then she's gone. Who knows who the heroes are? Maybe someday each of us will descend the mountain and begin to see the value in all of our sweeping and washing, the open promise of each day.