



1-1-2001

The Ad Man Monk

Asa Baber

Contributing Editor, Playboy Magazine

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baber, A. (2001). Baber, A. (2001). The ad man monk. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 20(1), 125–133.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 20 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2001.20.1.125>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Newsletters at Digital Commons @ CIIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CIIS. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ciis.edu.

The Ad Man Monk

Asa Baber

Contributing Editor, *Playboy Magazine*
Chicago, Illinois, USA

EVEN TODAY the valley leading up to the Tokufuji Temple is famous for its maple leaves in autumn.

The smog of Kyoto stays in Kyoto.

Past the third bridge and in front of the Sanmon Gate, it seems that time has gone back seven hundred years to the day Fujiwara Michiie ordered construction of the Temple.

So it was for Nagawa on that early October morning not long ago.

He left his family and friends and job and debts, and he walked up into the colorful valley. He did not bother to say goodbye to anyone. He simply turned his back on Kyoto.

Nagawa had been thinking of changing his life. Or ending it.

Once he had almost thrown himself under a train. And on more occasions than he could count, he had considered leaping out of his high office window.

His life seemed too shallow and too complicated for him.

Nagawa was a modish man. He wore three-piece suits from a British tailor in Hong Kong, high-heeled Italian boots, gold-rimmed spectacles, a gold Seiko watch. His hair was relatively long. It fell straight down over his collar and was as black as always; not a streak of gray in this, his fortieth year.

He drove a sports car. He read Mishima, especially after the writer's suicide, and he bought eight-track tapes of the Tokyo String Quartet. By chance, he had become interested

in Korean secular painting, and he fancied himself to be something of an expert in the area.

Nagawa's life was beautiful on the surface. But there was a fault running smack down the middle of it. He could feel unnamed forces shifting, rumbling. Pressures inside of him made him impatient and breathless and dizzy. Yet there was no single thing to blame for all his deeply felt chaos. It was just there, like a continual toothache.

One day this last autumn, while Nagawa was feeding pigeons in the park during his lunch hour, he happened to see a spread of monk's clothing in a pawn shop window across the street.

He had been singing a jingle to himself, but the moment he saw the clothing in the window he froze as if he had been sprayed with epoxy.

The pigeons continued to peck and coo at his feet. Cars and buses and motorcycles roared around the square. The white gloves of a policeman directing traffic moved in karate motions. But Nagawa had eyes only for the scenario that was filling his head.

Without talking to anyone about it, Nagawa finished his work that afternoon. He attended a conference on fuel injection layouts for next year's advertising campaign. He dictated a memo suggesting more market studies be done in the rural areas of Japan. He went through the motions of his job but his mind was somewhere else.

That evening, instead of his usual martini with friends at the rooftop bar, Nagawa went to the pawn shop and bought the entire monk's outfit: the formal traveling robe, the bundle of seasonal robes and kimonos with the Buddhist scriptures tied on top, the *jihatsu* bowl for feeding and begging, and a straight razor with a wooden handle for shaving his face and head.

The saucer-style hat draped too wide and low around his head. Nagawa did not want to buy that.

"It's like blinders for a horse," he said to the clerk.

"You must have it," said the clerk. "No Zen monk would be seen outside the monastery without a hat. You want to look like the real thing, don't you?"

"All right. Wrap all of it up, please. It's not for me, you understand. My company is putting on a play. It's a costume."

"Sure," said the clerk. He was younger than Nagawa but he spoke with the familiarity of a man who could put his hands in Nagawa's pockets whenever he wanted. "But just in case you decide to wear it yourself, let me tell you, it works. A friend of mine wore one of these monk's disguises into the Queen Bee. You know that bar on the Ginza? Hey, the girls were all over him. Wild, huh?"

"It's not for that," Nagawa said. He hurriedly paid the clerk and rushed out of the shop carrying several large packages.

With his London Fog raincoat and prosperous appearance, Nagawa had no trouble getting a cab.

He went to a bathhouse on the outskirts of Kyoto. He had been there a few times before. It was a modest and clean place. Traffic was still heavy and it took some time to get there.

Nagawa stored his things in a locker. Wearing only a towel, he walked into room number twelve, the one he had been assigned.

There was a steam cabinet, a bathtub, a low massage table, a wash basin and mirror, two wooden stools, and a white plastic bowl. The floor was white tile with a drain at its center.

"You want to steam first?" asked a woman who walked in behind him.

She was not very young. She had a pleasant face and mature body. Nagawa watched her

full breasts move in the bikini cups of her bathing suit. She carried an armful of white cotton towels.

"Why don't we sweat you up a little first?" She spoke in the guttural accent of the Ryukyu Islands. Nagawa had grown up listening to his father speak that way.

"I'll just have a bath and shampoo," Nagawa said. "And I'm going to ask a favor of you."

"Favors are my business," the woman said with a wiggle. She was leaning over the tub as she turned the faucets on full blast. "Just ask for Michiko."

"Please!" said Nagawa, still standing in the middle of the room. "I need my head shaved. Will you do that?"

Michiko stood up. She laughed. "Now I've heard everything."

"I'm serious! I even brought you this." He held the straight razor towards her. The blade was still enclosed in the handle.

Michiko looked carefully at Nagawa. She lifted the razor slowly from his hand. "You're a strange one," she said.

"Please!" Nagawa pleaded.

"It will cost you extra," she said cagily. "And I hope you're not planning on killing yourself when I'm done. That's the way with you skinny ones, you know? I had a doctor in here one night who slit his belly when my back was turned. What a waste! Of course, if you're going to do that kind of thing, might as well do it here where we can wash the blood right down the drain. We're never messy here."

"No, no," Nagawa said. "I'm going to be a monk. But I have to shave my head first."

"What? To be a monk? First you have to be crazy, that's what." She turned the water off. "Sit down over there." She pointed at the stool. "We'll take care of you. Take off your towel. I've seen it before, you know."

Nagawa crouched on the stool while Michiko fussed with the water in the tub. She ran hot water, then cold. Little by little she began to pour water down his back. She used the bowl for that.

Soon she was throwing scoops of water onto his head, his chest, his legs.

Nagawa felt like he was a target in a water fight.

"Stand up!" she commanded.

He stood. Michiko soaped his back and chest. Her warm fingers dug into his muscles. She lathered his groin and pulled on his penis. His knees were trembling.

Kneeling before him, she washed his thighs and calves, made a pass at his feet.

When he was a column of suds and bubbles, Michiko pushed him back onto the stool and splashed him with bowls of water again.

Nagawa felt foolish. He was embarrassed by his erection. "Michiko, please just shave my head. I am going to be a Zen monk. This other stuff is not doing me any good at all."

She was talking nonstop. Her words were earthy and simple. Nagawa was not used to such directness any more.

"If that's what you want, that's what you'll get. In the tub with you now. That's right. Rest your head on the ledge. I can shave you best there. But if you ask me, it's stupid for a good-looking man like you to shave all this hair. Don't the girls love it? I'll bet they do. You look like a Beatle, you know? John Lennon married a Japanese girl. I saw them on TV once. Put your head back. That's right. You're a baby and I'm your mommy and I'm going to go slowly so this doesn't hurt. Close your eyes. Go on. When you wake up you'll be just who you want to be. Isn't this ridiculous? Some of my best customers come in here with wigs on, but you want your head shaved. It doesn't make sense, but then what does?"

She chattered and laughed as Nagawa lay silently in the warm water.

He gave himself up to Michiko's ministrations. His long hair fell off and floated like seaweed in the water. Slowly, from front to back, the razor worked its way across his crown.

"What am I losing? What am I gaining?" These two questions echoed lazily in his mind, but in truth he did not think of much.

"There!" Michiko said at last. She ran her hands over his newly smoothed pate. "Want to see yourself?"

Nagawa rose up out of the water and stepped over to the mirror.

What he saw was another person with a tired face and a shining dome that looked pale and unprotected.

There were a few razor nicks. Nagawa dabbed at them with his towel.

"It's what you asked for!" Michiko said when she saw the sour expression on his face. "I told you it was crazy!"

"Who are you?" Nagawa asked the mirror image silently. "You look so weak. You're like a dead bonsai tree. Ugly!"

"Lie down on the table and I'll walk on your back," said Michiko.

"No! I'm finished here. I must go to the monastery!" Nagawa felt a panic that he did not understand.

"Listen, I'll give you an oil rub, all right? Warm oil. You'll love it." Michiko unhooked her bikini top and leaned against the sink. Her breasts were elegant and well shaped. She had amazingly long nipples that stood out like pegs.

Nagawa was lost in confusion. Michiko seemed beautiful to him. Her body was rich and her mouth was over-painted and she had one gold-capped eye tooth that she hid with her hand as she smiled. She was a bit stocky, and certainly without shame, but even those qualities appealed to him.

To Nagawa, this woman offering herself represented the world and the flesh, things he thought he was leaving.

"My suit and boots stay here!" he said rapidly as he ran down the corridor to his locker. "The raincoat too. Everything!" He tore at one of his packages as he talked. "Sell what you want. Give it away. I don't care. You can have my wallet too. Here. Take it! Go on."

He was dressing as fast as he could. The monk's robe was too big for him now. He realized that he had tried it on over his suit before.

Michiko stood with his suit draped in her arms and his wallet in her hands. She seemed uncertain. "Let me give you a hand job at least," she said. "This is worth a lot of money."

"No!" cried Nagawa.

He fled from the bathhouse. He stumbled down the steps in his clogs. The huge sleeves of the monk's robe floated around him. The hat almost blew off his head.

With one hand holding the hat and the other carrying the rest of the packages,

Nagawa shuffled through the suburbs of Kyoto. He looked like a bird in the night wind, a nervous crow under an enormous straw hat.

It was a long walk out of the city and up into the valley.

Nagawa almost gave up and called a cab. "No, no," he scolded himself, "you don't drive up to a monastery in a taxi! It's just not done that way."

In those hours before dawn, strange dogs roamed the streets. There were few cars on the road. Nagawa talked to himself as he walked. "They'll probably lie for me at the office. I wish I could see that. Mr. Iwashita will be in a rage by noon. I owe him those overlays on the sports coupe. 'He had too much to drink last night,' he'll tell Amy. 'Call his apartment and get him out of bed.' And of course Amy will stall him as long as she can. But she'll have to call sooner or later. Unless Reiko calls the office first because she's worried that I never came home. What a fuss! They'll think I'm dead."

He smiled as he moved through the empty streets. He thought of all the people he loved and hated, usually a little of both at the same time, and he imagined the various reactions they would have to his disappearance.

By the time the sun was up, Nagawa was high enough in the valley to see most of Kyoto. The yellowish haze that accompanied every rush hour was beginning to appear.

"The choice is simple," Nagawa said aloud to the maple trees. He was feeling very romantic. The reddening maple leaves seemed to warm him. "You trees are so beautiful! You are leading me straight to the Temple. Why would anyone want to go back down there to all that traffic? I'll live up here with you and your kind."

He reached the Sanmon Gate.

He was breathless and his toes were bloody from stumbling into things.

Nagawa set his packages down. There was a tablet hanging at the closed gate. He read it, puzzled:

— THE GATELESS GATE—
There is no definite gate
to enter The Great Way

"But I'm sure this is the right place," Nagawa said to himself. The road was not

heavily traveled. There were few places of distinction along the route. Nagawa knew the Tokufuji Temple when he saw it, and he knew there was a monastery inside.

He knocked loudly on the wooden gate. No one answered. He knocked again. "Hey! Open up in there!" He picked up a small maple branch and pounded.

The gate opened slightly.

A tall man in clogs stood before Nagawa. Was he a monk? He carried a long wooden staff in his hands. His head was shaved. He wore a black kimono. A man of indeterminate age, neither young nor old, with an expression that seemed fierce.

Nagawa smiled and extended his hand. "Good morning," he said, "I thought everyone was asleep. I have come to join you, you see—" but before those last words were out of his mouth, Nagawa felt a tremendous blow on his shoulders.

He had been knocked to the ground.

The tall man stood over him with his hands on the wooden staff. "You are not welcome here," he said in a gruff voice. There was spittle in the corners of his mouth.

Nagawa stared at the angry face. He felt weak from immense surprise.

Where were all the calm old men he had read about? Zen monks were peaceful creatures. But this was a *samurai*, this one. Certainly no monk. Possibly the Gatekeeper.

Yes. That fit Nagawa's logic. The Gatekeeper.

Nightclubs had bouncers, didn't they? So temples must have gatekeepers.

"Who was your temple priest?" asked the Gatekeeper. "You'd better tell me fast!" He took a step towards Nagawa.

"Wait a minute!" Nagawa cried. He held his hands over his head. He looked at his straw hat lying like a useless funnel in the dirt. "Let me talk to the Zen Master. Please! I must see the *Roshi*."

The Gatekeeper had already swatted Nagawa on the shoulder blades again. "You are not a disciple of anything! Go away!" He kicked dust at Nagawa's robes.

"I'm here to study and learn and meditate!" Nagawa choked. He was near tears. "Please let me talk to the *Roshi*." He wanted to turn and

run. He never thought his best hopes could be perverted like this.

"He doesn't have time for the likes of you!" The Gatekeeper prodded Nagawa in the ribs with his staff. "If you take my advice, you'll go back where you came from. But listen carefully, dumbbell. If you stay on these steps, then you must remain in a bowing posture. You will not look up. You will not look around. Look only beneath your feet. Understand?"

Nagawa nodded.

"Don't let me catch you gazing about. I'll beat you silly if I do. Just give me the chance and I'll make paste out of you."

Nagawa felt his knees tremble against the hard earth. He did not dare raise his head to watch the Gatekeeper go back through the Sanmon Gate, but he could hear the sound of his retreating clogs.

Leaning against the steps, his bare head bowed in his hands, Nagawa felt very unsure of himself. He was not used to this kind of treatment.

Wasn't he well known in Kyoto? He was respected. He always managed to get tickets to the theatre or the Sumo matches. He was known in some of the best restaurants. He golfed, drank with friends, spent some weekends in Tokyo. His salary bonus every New Year was always more than the year before.

Yet here he was, kneeling in the dirt at the foot of the steps of the Tokufuji Temple.

"Look beneath your feet!" was one of the last things the Gatekeeper had said.

"That man is so dumb and mean," Nagawa thought, "that I'd better do exactly as he says or I'll never get to see the Master."

Shifting his weight from haunch to haunch, Nagawa stared at the ground.

How boring! Nothing to see. It was worse than reading computer printouts.

Nagawa leaned back against the gatepost. He could hear things happening around him. Sometimes people walked by. He kept his head down. When would the Gatekeeper appear again?

Thigh muscles began to ache. Nagawa longed for his office chair with the leatherette arms. He thought of *udon*, the kind with the special noodles that he bought from the vendor

in the park. There was the smell of *udon* itself. Someone was boiling broth nearby, he would swear to it!

Cruel to cook upwind of a starving monk. Cruel to leave a man of good intentions squatting like a drunk over a *benjo* ditch. Nagawa had grown used to being entertained. He needed more than simple joys to keep boredom away.

There was the fly, for example.

It was probably the last fly in all of Japan that autumn. It was fat and slow, unaware of danger, naive as a blind angel. It walked across Nagawa's toes and buzzed past his face. Sometimes it flew up his robes.

Nagawa played a game with the fly. He cupped his hands over it. Then he released it. He studied it closely.

The fly's body had subtle reds and greens to it. There was a glint like that of fish scales.

Had he made a discovery? Were fish and flies related? Possibly from the same species many thousands of years ago?

"That's not bad!" Nagawa said to himself. "After all, there are flying fish. Now to find fishing flies!" He giggled at his own stupidities. But he was like this when there was nothing to do.

He felt as if he were a child again back in Naha. He was in his yard, all alone, trapping spiders, drowning ants, building mud forts and drawing meaningless designs in the dirt.

"Enough is enough!" Nagawa called out finally in a desperate voice. Even another beating by the Gatekeeper would be better than this tedium he was enduring. It was afternoon. It was late. Time was slipping by. "Come on! I can hardly move as it is! If you ask me, I've done a fine job out here!" He was yelling at the earth beneath his feet because he was still afraid to raise his head. "Hey! Let me in!"

There was no response.

The sky was clouding up and a cool wind picked dying leaves off the trees.

Nagawa debated with himself. Should he just barge in through the gate? Or should he give up and go back to Kyoto?

He was thirsty and tired.

He yawned. He dozed.

Soon he had curled into a ball and lay sleeping at the foot of the steps.

Nagawa was dreaming that he had been turned into a sterling silver fish. He was perfect in configuration, solid as a ball bearing. He flew over traffic jams. He swam home through water pipes. A helicopter tried to settle down on him and crush him against the concrete runway of the Kyoto Airport, but he was so tough and faultless in his silver shape that he survived without injury.

It was a dream that vacillated between fear and pleasure.

“Wake up, fool! Wake up!”

Nagawa struggled out of his reveries. He was being spanked. By his father? No, his father had been dead for years. It was dark. Night? Yes. Where?

“Wake up and come with me.”

The Gatekeeper was swatting Nagawa across the buttocks.

“Sorry!” Nagawa cried. He tried to hop to his feet but he was stiff from his day’s posture. He stumbled to his knees and had to push himself slowly to a standing position.

“What’s the matter with you?” the Gatekeeper asked. “Are you a cripple?” He hooked his wooden staff behind Nagawa’s ankles and tripped him up. Nagawa fell heavily on his backside. “Come on, fool! Get up! We can’t let you clutter these steps all night. You’ll stay in the guest house. Then I want you out of here by morning.”

Nagawa gathered his things together. He trotted through the gate behind the Gatekeeper, whose step was long and gliding.

They crossed a courtyard lit with torches. Once over a small wooden footbridge, they turned left towards a dark tea hut that stood by the far wall. Nagawa was led into a small room with sliding doors.

A candle burned on a stand. There was a *tatami* mat on the floor and a large screen by another door. A bucket of water with a wooden ladle, a small bowl of rice and a plate of pickled plums were set in the center of the mat.

“You may eat, drink, sleep. Whatever you wish,” said the Gatekeeper.

Nagawa felt his stomach tighten at the

smell of steaming rice. He could tell how foolish he looked to the Gatekeeper. Here he was, robe undone, packages loading his arms like an indulgent father shopping for Boy’s Day, his straw hat lost somewhere in the shadows of the room.

Yes, here he was, facing a rough and impassive man probably twice his size who looked as if he had been carved from mahogany, so neat and chiseled were his features.

“When may I see the *Roshi*?” Nagawa asked. It took all of his courage to do so.

The Gatekeeper laughed, not nicely. He pounded the handle of the wooden staff in his palms. The sound was sharp, as if the hands too were wood. “This is no place for a lush. Look at you! This is a Zen monastery, not a hotel for disappointed city folk. Do you really think things are easier here?” The Gatekeeper snorted. His nostrils flared. In the candlelight, his face took on the features of a *Kabuki* mask. “Go back to Kyoto. You smell of baby powder and soap!”

Nagawa had a sudden memory of Michiko lathering his penis. He squeezed his eyes shut. “How can I hope to be a monk when that kind of woman appeals to me?” he asked himself. He tried to make his voice brave and resonant: “I must see the *Roshi*. I want to be a monk. Surely you cannot stop me yourself!” Nagawa felt tears of frustration in his eyes.

Again the Gatekeeper laughed. “No. No. I can’t stop you.”

“Then let me see the Zen Master!” For the first time, Nagawa was able to be truly angry. He dropped his packages and stood with his fists clenched.

“You must earn that right,” said the Gatekeeper quietly.

“Then let me earn it!”

“Very well.” The Gatekeeper pointed at a scroll hanging on the screen. “Read that tablet over there. Go on.”

Nagawa stepped over to the screen. He tilted the scroll towards the candlelight. He read aloud:

If a man climbed a high tree and hung from its highest branch—not with his hands and feet but with his

teeth—and if someone came along and asked him the meaning of Zen, how should he answer?

It was Nagawa's turn to laugh. "That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" asked the Gatekeeper.

"I never heard of such a thing."

"Too bad."

"What do you mean?"

"There are eighteen hundred *koans* in Rinzai Zen," said the Gatekeeper. "It takes the best minds at least fifteen years to solve them all. Our *Roshi* has done that, for example, but he is the only one here who has."

"That's why I want to see him," said Nagawa. "I always go to the top man. That's just good business."

"Fine. But first you must answer the riddle you just read. It is one of the simpler *koans*, I assure you."

Nagawa looked from the tablet to the Gatekeeper. There were a thousand questions he wanted to ask. "Wait!" he called as the Gatekeeper stepped out the door.

The door slid shut.

Nagawa was left alone.

Suddenly, it was cold. Nagawa shivered.

There was no *hibachi*.

He saw a rat scurry across the *tatami* mat.

"I'd better eat," Nagawa said to himself.

He sat cross-legged on the floor, the way he used to do as a child. He ate rapidly. He drank from the ladle and water dribbled down his chest.

Were the monks spying on him through the rice paper walls? Was this some kind of a test?

"I don't care," Nagawa said loudly. His voice sounded strange to him in the still night. He went on talking. "I wonder what time it is. Hey! Anybody got the time? You might as well answer. This silent treatment is really stupid, you know? If I wanted an initiation I'd join the Boy Scouts again. You should let me see the *Roshi*. I can be just as stubborn as you. I can wait. I've cooled my heels for some of the biggest people around."

Nothing, not even wind.

Nagawa felt as if he were inside a spaceship. He was floating out in a vacuum, a limbo.

He turned his mind to the *koan*. He spoke again. "If I were hanging from a branch by my teeth? That's crazy. Nobody can do that. Parrots, maybe. But not people. Not even monkeys. So the whole thing's invalid, right? I mean, it doesn't even deserve thinking about. The answer is that there's no answer."

Nagawa waited. He had a fantasy that the walls would be torn down by monks eager to congratulate him on his quick solution.

But there was nothing.

"All right!" he talked on after a time. "If I were hanging by my teeth from a branch and someone came along and asked me the meaning of Zen? Let's see. If I said anything I'd break my neck, right? Right. But if I didn't answer the question, then I'd insult the person, right? Wait a minute! It depends on the person!" Nagawa smiled. "Sure. I mean, who would be stupid enough to ask me anything in a situation like that? Huh? You're walking along in the forest and you look up and some poor bastard is hanging by his teeth way up there. Are you really going to ask him a question? 'How's it going? How's the wife? What's the meaning of Zen?' " Nagawa laughed and held his arms wide as if he had an audience. "Anyone who asks a question at a time like that doesn't deserve an answer! Agreed?"

What was that sound he heard? An owl? A cat? Were there people shuffling behind the walls or was that another rat?

He stared at the candle flame. It was hypnotic, especially now with food in his belly. It had been such a long day.

Nagawa spoke to the empty room again, but this time his tone was less strident.

"If I were hanging by my teeth, the only way I could answer questions would be through sign language. Right? Now that makes sense." He thought for a minute. "Look at it this way. If a deaf mute were hanging by his teeth and another deaf mute came through the forest, it would really be easy for them to communicate. Right? Since they both would know sign language?"

It was a silly thought. Nagawa knew that. But it was also a possible answer. He was feeling just desperate enough to reach for anything.

Was it accepted? Apparently not. No one came in to get him.

Nagawa began to lose the focus. He thought of other things. His head nodded, and at times he probably dozed.

He came back to the *koan* occasionally.

"But if a deaf mute were hanging by his teeth, he wouldn't be able to hear the other deaf mute coming through the forest, so how would he know when to signal?"

Oh the fatigue. Who could care about a far-fetched *koan* when the need for sleep was overwhelming? It was much too much to ask of anyone.

Besides, all the monks were asleep, weren't they? Nagawa couldn't hear a thing outside. Not even the Gatekeeper.

But what if it was a test? What if the Gatekeeper was crouching behind the wall just waiting for him to go to sleep?

No, he must not sleep.

He must think. Think of his life. Compose himself for the meeting with the *Roshi*.

Ah, the *Roshi*.

The *Roshi* would be an old man with a face as wrinkled as a copper washboard. He would be kind and gentle and wise. He would smile passively at Nagawa and say "Yes, my son," and "No, my son," and "It is written in the stars, my son." He would pat Nagawa on the back in a gesture of appreciation. He would signal to the other monks that they were to make room for this searcher, this weary wanderer who had given up all for Truth.

"Prepare a pallet for this noble man," the *Roshi* would order, "for he has given up the world of ambition and lust and charge cards to enter into our ways of meditation and silence. Let us welcome him with open hearts."

Gongs would sound. Bells would tinkle. Wooden blocks would be clapped together.

Nagawa would be divested of his robes. He would be swaddled in a kimono, and perhaps a strange light would shine above his head as he left the grievance, the disturbance, the farce of the material world.

"I will make a fine monk," Nagawa whispered to himself.

He did not realize it, but for the second time that night he slept.

"Fool! Hey! Fool!" The Gatekeeper was prodding him with his foot.

Nagawa rolled over. "Sorry!" he mumbled.

It was dark. The candle had gone out. "Can you see the lines in your palm?"

"Pardon?" Nagawa yawned. He was sitting up now.

"Hold out your hand. Can you see the lines in your palm?"

Nagawa held his right hand close to his face. "Sort of."

"Why, then, it is morning. Get up! Pull yourself together. It's time for you to go back to Kyoto." The Gatekeeper lit the candle.

Nagawa stood slowly. "Oh no you don't. I get to see the *Roshi*, remember?"

The Gatekeeper leaned on his staff. "Only if you solved the *koan*, remember?" He smiled like a bandit.

Nagawa had forgotten his part of the obligation. He scratched his head. Strange to feel naked scalp. "I've thought a lot about that *koan*," he said slowly. Suddenly, an audience with the *Roshi* was a frightening thing. Nagawa feared failure the way a wolf fears fire.

"And?"

"It's quite a riddle to me."

The Gatekeeper snorted. "Do you have the answer?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?" The Gatekeeper stared at him with eyes of ice.

"No. I have to think about it a little longer. I have a lot of possible answers, you see? I just have to sort them out. Could you come back a little later?"

"No," said the Gatekeeper simply. "We don't run on your schedule here. You are either ready to face the *Roshi* or you are not. Which is it?"

This change in momentum. What was happening? A few hours ago Nagawa had been ready to fight for his right to interview the *Roshi*. Now he was afraid.

"I don't have the whole thing solved yet," Nagawa protested. "But I'm really close to it. I only have to tie up some loose ends." Why this sense of panic? "I can't do everything at once. I have some pride you know. I can't face the

Roshi until I know what I'm going to say. Give me another hour. Another half hour?" Nagawa hated the whine of his own voice.

"You are not ready?"

"When I'm ready I'll let you know," said Nagawa. "Don't bother me until then." He was trying to sound officious. It was a tone he had used with success on airline ticket clerks, waitresses, hotel managers.

It didn't work this time.

"Come along," said the Gatekeeper. He was pulling Nagawa by the wrist. "Surely anyone as smart as you has the answer."

"I'll come when I'm ready!" shouted Nagawa. He jerked his wrist out of the hold. It hurt to do that. He rubbed his arm.

The light in the room was grey like old newspaper. "I'm the kind of man who does his homework first," said Nagawa. "I keep my mouth shut until I know what I'm talking about. Understand?"

The Gatekeeper seemed to relax. He nodded his head. "That makes very good sense," he said quietly.

"Damn right it does," sulked Nagawa. "You don't go off half-cocked where I come from.

"So I'm working on the *koan*. I'll let you know when I'm ready." Nagawa realized he was sweating in the cool morning air. "I can see the situation, all right? A man is hanging by his teeth. Someone walks under him and asks him a question. How does the man answer?"

"Precisely."

"Right. It's a tough one. You can't be too careful when you're answering something like that. You can't come out with anything that strikes your fancy. No sir." Nagawa's head was bobbing in agreement with himself.

"No."

Nagawa found himself picking up his packages. "I'll tell you what. I'm going to think really hard about that *koan*. Every day." He found his hat in the corner. "I'll check all the options. One by one. When I've got the answer, I'll be back. All right?"

"Fine."

Nagawa felt like a guest who has stayed too long at a party. The Gatekeeper seemed bored with him. Nagawa fumbled with all the things he was carrying.

"Of course, it doesn't matter where I am while I'm thinking, does it? I'll go back to Kyoto and soak my bruises and work on that *koan*." As he said this, he thought of Michiko. "It's not so bad in the city." Nagawa paused. What else was there to say? "So goodby!"

He backed slowly out of the room, half bowing. He tried to read the thoughts of the Gatekeeper. Impossible.

Nagawa shrugged his shoulders. He turned, walked through the yard, passed under the frame of the Sanmon Gate.

Kyoto lay before him. It was downhill. An easy walk through the maple leaves that had fallen like a thousand napkins from the trees.

From the tea house, a group of monks watched Nagawa's figure moving down the road. He was almost jogging. A gust of wind caught his straw hat and sailed it like a saucer out over the valley. Nagawa did not even look back.

"He was very close, wasn't he?" asked the Gatekeeper with a small smile. "If he had come face to face with me and taken his rebuke and then gone back to meditating, he might have come near his gate to The Great Way."

"Yes *Roshi*," said the others, bowing.

