

### Chapter 3: The Attainment of Enlightenment

#### Day 24: Between Places, Between Prayers

March 27

*“Let go or be dragged.” —Zen proverb*

The Third Noble Truth, *Nirodha*, reminds us that suffering can end. Not by force, but by loosening our grip. When we stop clinging, when we stop pushing away, we find peace waiting quietly in the present moment.

The morning blossomed in soft shades of gold and blue, the kind of light that seems to bless everything it touches. The rising sun warmed the earth in slow, generous waves. I woke stiff beneath the thin material of my tent, the steepness of yesterday’s climb still lodged deep in my calves and hips. The unsettling, almost surreal drama in the park already felt distant, as though it had belonged to another life or someone else's dream.

There was comfort in the familiar. My morning routine had become a kind of walking meditation: unclip the tent poles, roll the sleeping pad tight, tighten the pack straps, lace up my

trail shoes in double knots. The rhythm of readiness was as grounding as any chant or breath exercise. I moved through it slowly, deliberately, allowing my body time to recalibrate while my mind followed the regular logic of each step. Every small task reminded me: *I am still here*. Still walking. Still becoming.

The road waited without urgency. It unfurled in a gentle arc along the coast, bending beyond sight, patient and unspeaking. Cherry blossoms drifted on the breeze like forgotten secrets, catching in my hair, sticking to the damp straps of my pack, clinging for a moment before fluttering away. How many things in life are like that—beautiful, ungraspable, briefly ours?

I walked without urgency, without agenda. I no longer checked the map every hour or recalculated kilometers. The path had become less about direction and more about rhythm: breathe and step, step and breathe. In that rhythm, something loosened inside me. Not everything needed to be measured. Not every moment needed meaning.

At *Kanjizaiji* I found Norihito again. His presence was like the sight of a distant lantern: reassuring and familiar, even in silence. He smiled when he saw me. We nodded in recognition. A bow, a grin. No need for anything more.

Inside the temple, the air was cool and fragrant with incense. The priest pressed the crimson seal into my book with practiced care, his hands deliberate and calm. He offered kind words, something about the path ahead, the weather turning warmer, places to rest. I caught fragments and filled in the rest with tone and gesture. It didn't matter if I misunderstood a few words. What mattered was the intent: the sharing of kindness, the gentle encouragement of someone who had watched countless *henro* pass through these gates. Norihito left the temple

before me, his body hunched slightly under the weight of his pack, worn sneakers already damp with dew.

By midday, I came upon Norihito again at a roadside *henro* hut, a humble wooden shelter tucked into the curve of the road like a secret. We sat together on the bench, shoes off, backs resting against the rough wood. We shared what we had: a couple of hardboiled eggs, *onigiri*, and cookies that tasted even sweeter in the sun. Our conversation was simple, pieced together with hand gestures, quiet laughter, and the occasional successful word. Mostly, we didn't talk. There's a kind of language that only the road teaches, a fluency in silence, in shared experience, in the weight of tired legs and grateful bellies.

When it was time to go, I stood first. Norihito waved me on, and I bowed slightly before stepping out again. His pace had slowed in recent days, his energy flagging under the strain of ill-fitting gear and sore knees. But still, he walked. Some pilgrims move forward on strength, others on faith. And some, like Norihito, on sheer quiet perseverance.

The afternoon passed in a blur of blossoms and coastline. Wild cherry trees spilled down the hillsides like pink rivers, their petals catching the wind and sweeping across the trail in gentle gusts. The sea stretched out beside me, calm and endless, a mirror to the sky's shifting hues. There were moments I felt entirely weightless, as though my body had dissolved into the landscape, as though my heartbeat matched the slow, steady rhythm of the earth itself.

A part of me wanted to hold that feeling forever, to bottle it like spring water, to sip from it whenever life grew too sharp or fast or fractured. But I knew better. Like all moments, it would pass. The beauty of the pilgrimage wasn't in preserving such feelings, but in recognizing them, honoring them, and letting them go. Step by step. Breath by breath.

The road was empty for long stretches—no cars, no vending machines, no other pilgrims in sight. Just the path and the sky, the smell of cedar and brine, the occasional buzz of a cicada or the startled flutter of a pheasant darting into the underbrush. I wasn't lonely. In fact, I felt deeply accompanied.

Not by people, but by something subtler, quieter, by the silence itself. By the memory of those I loved. By the thought that somewhere, someone might be thinking of me, wondering where I was. Out here, the silence wasn't empty, it was inhabited. It had a weight, a presence. It opened up space inside me that the noise of daily life often smothered. And in that space, memories stirred like leaves in a breeze.

Harvey came to mind.

I'd started seeing him for therapy about a year after I began dating Betsy. Something had begun to break open in me, an anger I couldn't explain, emotional waves I couldn't always control. I wasn't violent, not like my father had been, but I recognized the heat behind my words, the sharpness in my tone, the way I could shut someone down with a glance or a phrase. I hated it. I hated who I became in those moments.

And beneath that anger, Harvey helped me see, was something even more frightening. Not rage. Not shame. But pain. Old pain. Unnamed, unacknowledged, embedded so deeply in my muscles and marrow that I no longer knew where it ended and I began. Harvey once told me there are five basic emotions: happy, sad, afraid, angry—and the one I always forgot, hurt.

"Why do you think you always forget hurt?" he would ask, gently, like offering a stone for me to carry until I was ready to understand it. He never pushed for an answer. He just let the question sit between us like incense smoke; ungraspable, but unmistakable. It stayed with me

like a *kōan*, a spiritual riddle not meant to be solved but lived with, allowed to work on me from the inside. A breeze moved through the cedars. I let the question echo again.

Up until I turned twelve, I saw my mother as my protector. She was the one who stood between me and my father when things got tense, who offered softness in a house where silence was its own form of punishment. She read to me at night, sat at the edge of my bed, rubbed my back until I fell asleep. She was my safe place. Even when my father's moods turned cold or sharp, she was the warmth I could return to. Her presence, back then, was a kind of tether to something gentler. Something whole.

But then, things began to shift.

We moved, twice in three years. First from Chicago, the only place that had ever felt like home, to Indiana. Then again, to Madison, Wisconsin. My parents said it was for my father's career, but there was something else behind their explanations, something left unsaid. I was too young to name it, but I felt it—the tension, the shrinking, the way my mother's eyes darted more often, the way my father's voice came louder and colder through the walls.

We went from a modest house with a backyard and friends next door to a cramped, low-rent apartment in a forgettable brick building. The kind of place you don't photograph. The kind of place you stop inviting people into. Money was tight. I heard the word *eviction* whispered behind closed doors. I came home to empty rooms more often. My mother worked longer hours. My father disappeared, not physically, but into himself, into work, into some private cave I couldn't follow him into. I was alone a lot. I learned to be quiet. I learned to watch. I learned that silence could be heavy. Even dangerous.

Then, without warning, we moved again, this time into a house. A modest place on a busy street. I didn't understand how it was possible. How did we have the money to pay for this? No one explained anything. It felt like a ceasefire in a war I didn't fully understand.

We had no car, only my father's motorcycle. There was no garage, so we kept the bike in the living room so it would start on cold winter mornings. At the time, it all seemed normal. Now, it feels like a clue in a story I couldn't yet read.

Another new school. Another new neighborhood. Another round of sizing people up, figuring out how to survive. I got into fights on the playground, in the street, at the bus stop. I let my hair grow long, maybe as defiance, maybe as armor. My father hated it. Said it made me look like a girl. Or worse. He used words I won't repeat now.

Then, three days before Christmas, it all boiled over.

He was yelling again, about my hair, about respect, about how I never listened. My mother stood between us, her voice tight with panic, pleading for calm. But I'd had enough. I stood my ground. I remember the way my heart pounded in my chest, the way my jaw clenched. I wasn't backing down. I wanted him to see that I wasn't afraid anymore, even if I still was.

He moved faster than I'd ever seen him. Off the couch in one fluid motion, his fist swinging in a wide arc. I managed to throw my arm up just in time. It caught the blow, but the force knocked me off my feet. I hit the ground hard.

Everything froze. Time held its breath. My mother stared. My father loomed. I remember the way he looked down at me, like Ali standing over Liston, his chest heaving, eyes wild.

I got up slowly. Went to my room. Slammed the door. I packed a small bag with whatever I could grab, a change of clothes, a toothbrush. Then I climbed out the window and into the fresh snow. It was clean and cold and absolute. I didn't look back.

I remembered waiting in the snow. Not long, maybe ten minutes. Long enough. I waited for someone to come after me. To call out. To open the door. To say *come back* or *please don't go*.

No one did.

By Christmas, a truce had been called. We didn't speak about the fight. We just went on as if nothing had happened. But it had. My mother's pleading voice had vanished. Her body, once my shield, had frozen in place. She hadn't stopped him. She hadn't followed me. That was the wound. That was the hurt I always forgot.

For years, that moment lived in me as *the* moment. The blow. The fracture. The day everything changed. But months into my work with Harvey, another layer surfaced; not the violence, but the silence that followed it. He helped me find that forgotten hurt. Not all at once, but piece by piece. The hurt wasn't just about violence. It was about abandonment. About the moment when the person who was supposed to protect me ... didn't. About the way I stopped expecting to be rescued. Stopped asking. Learned to walk into the snow without looking back. I wondered if Matthew felt this same kind of hurt.

It took years to forgive her. Decades, really. But the work mattered. We rebuilt trust slowly, not through dramatic reconciliations or tearful apologies, but through the long labor of love: shared meals, weekend visits, quiet phone calls. And in the end, my caring for her when she became frail. The quiet rituals of a relationship that refuses to die.

We found each other again, not as mother and child, but as two people who had survived the same storm, even if we'd stood in different rooms. When she died, we were at peace. That, I'm grateful for. We had made it back to each other. Not perfectly. Not without scars. But honestly. Lovingly.

Evening settled over the trail as I arrived at a small *onsen* tucked back from the road near Tsushima-cho. Modest, it was wedged between a grocery and a gravel lot, but it had everything I needed. The salt and sweat of the day melted away in the mineral waters. I leaned back, eyes closed, letting the steam soften the stiffness in my shoulders, the sting in my knees. Around me, a few older locals soaked in silence. I imagined they'd been coming here for decades, perhaps since childhood. The bath was a ritual for them too, a closing of the day, a washing away of worry.

Later, I sat outside the bathhouse in clean clothes, sipping a cold bottle of beer and watching the sky darken. The moon had just begun to rise, its pale light glinting off the ocean in the distance. I thought of the journey still ahead, temples to visit, mountains to climb, old wounds to tend to.

And I thought of the ones behind me, each step a page in this developing story, each encounter a small lantern illuminating the way. I realized I hadn't just been walking through the landscape. I had been walking through memory. Through the hushed hallways of my own story. And with each step, something in me was softening. Something was healing.

Out there, in the quiet, the road had offered what Harvey once promised: not answers, but the spaciousness to live the questions. Not resolution, but presence.

Somewhere, deep in the quiet, I heard Harvey's voice again.



“Why do you always forget hurt?”

I didn't, not anymore.

That night, I slept in my tent under a cherry tree. I rested deeply, grateful for the gift of water, the gentleness of the day, and the quiet company of another walker on this same road. Tomorrow would bring its own weather, its own questions, its own revelations. But that night, I was between places. Between prayers. Held lightly by this moment, by this night, by the vast and sacred middle distance.