

Practice Notes: Teach Yourself to Grow Food

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on April 21, 2010

There is a saying, that goes something like, “It’s more useful in the long term to teach someone to grow their own food than it is to feed them.” If they’re hungry, of course, you should feed them. But if you feed them, and they don’t know how to grow their own food, then they’re going to be hungry again for the next meal and the next meal, and you’re going to have to keep feeding them. But if you teach them a skill, then they can take care of themselves. So this idea can also relate to the inner life, Buddhist practice, your practice. And one of the interesting reflections is, how to translate that saying to oneself, or to one’s personal life.

Is it more valuable to finish all the tasks you have to do, to get everything done on your to-do list? Or is it more valuable to learn how to do one task with some sense of ease? Being relaxed, or calm – or to do it without a sense of conflict, without a lot of self-centeredness, identity, a lot of ‘shoulds.’ How can you do something and be at ease about the outcome – to be at ease with what’s there, as opposed to just doing a lot of things?

And, I think, that for the inner life, both for your own life and for others, learning how to be at ease with the situations of our life, that’s a skill that is applicable in many different situations. Learning how to accomplish a task may or may not be helpful elsewhere. So, for example, if you have to go home and cook dinner, you could think that the purpose of cooking dinner is to get it cooked as quickly as possible – to have a successful dinner so that everyone’s well fed and everyone thinks you’re a great cook. And while you’re cooking the dinner, you’re also thinking about all the other things that have to be done, and you want to get the cooking done as quickly as you can so you can do something else. Maybe that’s one valuable way of living a life; maybe you’ll get a lot done. But with that kind of agenda, you’re not learning for yourself, or conveying to other people, how to be at ease in this world of ours and how to feel some peace about the life we have.

Perhaps in the bigger picture of things, it’s actually more important to learn how to cook that meal where you’re really there just for the meal, and to be able to put aside all the long list of all you have to do – not doing it to get it over with as quickly as you can, but really doing it because that’s what you’re doing in the moment – to learn how to drop all the desires and shoulds and expectations and ego that might be connected to it, and just do it in a peaceful way. To be content, to be at peace, just for that. To learn that skill with cooking dinner, which might be helpful in other situations in your life, but to also how to do it wholeheartedly, without any tension.

So I think of this not so much for your sake, but it might be really important for others that you learn this. For those of you who have children, it’s possible that the most important thing you can do for them, is not to get the meal on the table. But in the bigger picture, the most important thing you can do for them is, somehow through osmosis, convey to them your sense of being at ease or at peace, while you’re cooking the meal. Because if you’re doing the meal frantically, frustratingly, anxious about the other things that have to be done, then there’s something that gets conveyed in your atmosphere. And what you convey is not so helpful in the bigger picture. If you could convey to children that it’s okay to be at ease, it’s possible to be at ease with what’s here, what’s needed, what’s being done – it’s like teaching someone to farm rather than just feeding them.

And, perhaps, it’s the simple thing around cooking a meal. But what happens when your child breaks a bone? How do you take care of that? Is that the time to get frantic, anxious, upset, afraid? It’s a fragile, vulnerable time when a child breaks a bone. What gets conveyed in how we respond to it? If we respond as if, “This is terrible; this shouldn’t have happened; this is a disaster; this happened at school. Oh no, these people at school are not doing their job; they’re not caring for my kid; I’m going to call the principal and be upset, and poor kid” – there are all these unhealthy things that can be conveyed. But what about conveying, “I’m going to try to help you the best I can, and I’m not worried about this. I’m not anxious. I’m not angry.” Just be at ease with it.

Some of you heard the story of one of the important osmotic teachings I received from my father, was when I was 14. My friend and I took the keys of his car to go for a ride, to drive, and we didn’t make it very far. We only made it like a foot or two [laughs] because we didn’t know what we were doing. Because right next to where the car was there was a parked bulldozer. And we managed to get the car going, and it jerked and ran right into the bulldozer. The bulldozer was okay [laughs]. I felt pretty bad. Here we were doing something we

weren't supposed to do, and we didn't have a driver's license or anything, and didn't have permission, going for a joy ride in my Dad's car, and we crash it. So I called him up at work and said, "Dad, this is what happened," and he said to me in a very relaxed way, "Oh, can the car still drive?" And I said, "Oh yeah, the car still drives but you can't open the right-hand door anymore." And he said, "See what you can do about it. I'll be home this evening." And I never heard anything more about it, ever. And the fact that he held it so – of course it was unfortunate – but there was no anger; there was no shame; he held it with this ease, without a sense of conflict. I think he could do it because I felt remorse that he could feel in my voice. I'd confessed. I felt pretty bad about what happened, so he didn't need to be angry with me. It was an unfortunate thing that happened. Does it help to be angry or frustrated or afraid? But rather, he held it with ease, and conveyed taking care of it the best you can – try to fix it.

So how do we learn how to live a responsible life, to meet life as it requires us to take care of it, and to be at ease with how things are, not to be anxious about it, or not to be in conflict with it? And that skill gets even more dramatic when things do go wrong, when we fail. So, "How can we stay relaxed, at ease, when we make a mistake, when things go in a way we don't want them to go?" Is there a fundamental skill, or capacity, that we can learn about – not getting activated with anxiety, or anger, or fear – or not getting activated by issues of self-identity, self-image? And in doing that, can we convey to ourselves, to our own heart, and to others perhaps, a way of going through our life with greater ease, even when things themselves are not easy to take care of?

I think this is one of the tasks and challenges of Buddhist practice. It's not about what you do, but how you are as you do it. And if you can learn something about how, or you can be at peace with how things are, then hopefully no matter where you go, you can carry that with you. So, I hope that, when you come to Buddhist practice, we're not feeding you – we're teaching you how to farm.