

Dharmette: Begin Again

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on January 14, 2015

There was the past. There will be the future. There is the present.

Sometimes, we forget that the past was. In English, it is probably more grammatically correct to say the past is. But the past was; the future will be; and the present is what is. Sometimes, we carry with us the history, the ideas of what happened in the past. Sometimes there are powerful memories. We then see the present through the memories of what happened, and to some degree through the conditioning of the past. We evaluate our life.

Sometimes we are focused on the future. The future will always be an imagination. Some people have vivid imaginations, and can envision all kinds of futures. Sometimes that future is so big and so heavy that it has a significant impact on how we live now. Sometimes the imagined future is dreadful – all these terrible things that are going to happen. Sometimes we imagine a future where all of these wonderful things are going to happen. For example, “I’m going to become Mr. Universe. It’ll be great when I buff up, and I live in the world of what that will be like.”

But it is also a big burden to spend a lot of time carrying the past with us. It is a big burden to invent the future and live by it. Things can be a lot easier if we are more in the present. There is a particular way of being in the present that I have found very meaningful, which is that – probably much more often than you realize – you get to start over in the present. You get to start all over again!

When I was living at the Zen monastery in Tassajara, I worked in the kitchen for a year. After a while, I understood something about practicing in the kitchen. Depending on the time of year, we had to make between three and six meals per day. There were anywhere from forty to one hundred people who would eat those meals. That’s a lot of people who won’t like you if you screw up with the food [laughs]. Sometimes the meals we made would work out. Sometimes they wouldn’t. There was always food. After a while of doing this, I discovered that I wasn’t fired, which was nice. I discovered that each day, when I woke up, I got to try again. Every day was a new beginning. That was yesterday that we burned the rice. “Oh! Today we get to try again.” It’s a new beginning. There is food left behind. It’s either in the compost or in the toilet. Wherever food goes, it’s gone. Now, we get to start again with a whole new recipe, a whole new batch of rice. The idea is starting fresh, to wake up and start again.

Over my lifetime, I’ve had difficult relationships with some people at times. Sometimes these things work themselves out in wonderful ways. Thinking back, one of the ways I am really fond of, is relationships in which we made a decision to just start over again. “Let’s just start over. Today. Let’s just start all new. Let’s not bring with us what happened in the past. We’re not going to sort it out. We’re not going to figure it out. Let’s just start fresh.” And so we did. It was nice and very interesting to start over.

The present moment is a place where, more often than you realize, you get to start all over. The next step is a new life – unless you bring with you all of the memories, ideas, past experiences, and associations. You don’t want to forget about those things, because maybe then you’ll do foolish things again. Maybe you’ve done a few foolish things in your life, and you’ve learned. The idea is, that this moment here is fresh. You can start over again, and take the next step.

Some people can imagine hearing sounds and seeing colors. I sort of envy them. There are certain kinds of brains that work in certain ways. Maybe I have a peculiar brain, but I have a physical sense of the passing of time. It’s almost a physical feeling, seeing the future arriving. This next moment is just a big, open, vast expanse. This next time. It’s always coming. It’s always starting over again. Here. This new thing.

This idea of starting over again was very important for me when I was in the monastery in Tassajara. As a young person, I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. I spent a lot of time in my head thinking about my life, my future, what I was supposed to do. Should I do service work in some way and help the world? Should I stay in the monastery? It was actually painful for me to spend the year there. Mostly I thought about this on my days off. On the monastic days ‘on,’ I was distracted from that particular suffering. But on the days off, I was no longer

distracted. Alone, I spent a lot of time thinking and wondering. At some point, I realized that I was living in an abstract world. I was living in a world of imaginary futures, imaginary activities elsewhere. It had nothing to do with the concreteness of the life that I was living. I couldn't find my way anymore in this abstract thinking. One day, I made the decision that I would start over. I would just take the next step: the next thing that came my way. That was a turning point in my life – to start all over again. It was a peculiar place to start over for the next step because it was a Zen monastery. Maybe that was a good choice. If I had made that choice at a bar [laughter], I don't know where I would be today. Maybe you ought to be careful where you start fresh. I took the next step. In some ways, my life since then has become more complicated, but to some degree, it has been the next step, the next step, and building on that.

Even though it builds on that, more often than not, when I wake up, I still feel that I get to start all over again. I get to start over again with my practice. I get to start over again with my life. Let's see what's happening today. What's this now?

I don't think I carry the past with me so much. I am more interested in the next step. The idea of the next step is so wonderful. Far in the future is kind of pale. But the immediate future that is coming now is so full of potential. Take that next step, and meet that... and meet that... and meet that. There is something great about meeting that next step. That's the opportunity of the present moment. It's not just a matter of living in the present moment, but you can be in the present moment enough that you can start over.

Maybe, from time to time, you make a mistake, you have a regret, or you have some difficulty or challenge that seems too big. You can just take the next step, and you don't have to carry the burden of the past with you. You can take the next step, and not worry so much how tall the mountain is. Just the next step. Start over. Maybe starting over will give you your freedom.

So, those are my thoughts for today. I hope you have a good beginning.