

Dharmette: Everything Is Important

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on March 11, 2015

There is a Sufi story about Mullah Nasreddin, a wise fool. He has a garden but the garden is plagued by weeds. He tries to get rid of the weeds, but he has a hard time. He goes to visit all kinds of gardeners and master gardeners, and they all give him really good advice about how to deal with these weeds. He tries all of the advice. He's very diligent but it doesn't work. He's at his wit's end about what to do about these weeds.

He hears of this very old master gardener who works with the monarch of this realm. He makes it to the palace and finds this old wise gardener. He explains the situation. He explains all of the things he's done to get rid of these weeds. The old wise gardener thinks for a long time. Then he says "There's only one more thing you can try. Love the weeds."

Maybe because I'm not a very wise gardener, I would prefer a little different approach. And that is, you don't try everything first and then love the weeds. You love the weeds first, and then you try all of the different things you can do. Bring your love to what is there – to you, yourself, your challenges, your fear, your anger.

You might have some little, small, idiosyncratic things going on in your little heart and mind that are a little challenging for you. You might have things happen in your life which are challenging. What would happen if you offered them your love first – your kindness, your friendship, your good will? And that's the first approach to whatever is going on, to whatever is challenging, to have good will towards it – to turn towards it with kindness, with gentleness, with tenderness, with respect.

When I was a student at Stanford, I took a history class, History of Japanese Buddhism. There was a lot to learn in that class, a lot of very rich history. Before or after class one day, I was talking to the professor. There was some aspect of Japanese history that we were learning that seemed kind of minor. I don't remember the details, but it was something like this: I said to him "Oh, so we don't have to pay attention to that. That's not important. That's so minor. We can just put that aside." He turned to me and said "Gil, everything is important." That made such a big impression on me – everything is important.

I studied in the Zen tradition. The Soto Zen tradition has a pithy little sound bite for some core aspect of their teaching, how they practice. The expression is: attention to detail. It is very inspiring for me, very meaningful to be around people who offer care – and attention and love – to the details of their life.

The first time I saw it in a Zen Center was when I was very young, I was just beginning to get interested in Buddhism and Zen. I went to visit the Los Angeles Zen Center. They met in a bungalow-like house in South Central LA. They were meditating in the middle of the living room of what used to be a house. It was a zendo. Maybe twenty people were there. The way they did the meditation was they did a session of meditation, then ten minutes of walking meditation, then another session of meditation.

We got up to do the single file walking meditation, walking around the perimeter of the room. There was this woman walking in front of me. She came to these black mats, the zabutons, which were all around the wall. One of them was slightly out of alignment with all of the other ones. She leaned down and straightened it out. My reaction was "why did she do that? Why in the world would you take the time to align a mat that was not straight?" I wasn't even thinking about why I thought it should be left alone. This was attention to detail. Watching the Zen priests, the care with which they use their cups. They would hold and put down their cups as if it was the most important thing. While they're holding it, just that. Just be with it.

All of these little ideas come together with the idea that maybe we can begin with respect, with love, with attention to everything. Everything is important. All of the people we meet. Maybe those people are important. It's so easy to not see people as important, to not treat people as important, or that some people are more important than others. We have probably all been in situations where there are people who are intensely engaged with each other. They're ignoring the people who are not involved in the conversation. Some people are not seen as being worth their attention.

There is another beautiful thing I saw as a very young Zen student. In 1979 there was a meeting of American Zen teachers. Many of them were Japanese. They had a meeting at Green Gulch Zen Farm, where I was staying. They were having a business meeting, talking about themselves. I don't know what they were talking about. Because they were all there, there were about nine of them, they had a panel discussion with all of the Zen students one evening. I got to watch how they behaved. I remember watching one of the Zen teachers. Someone came and brought them tea as they were sitting there on the panel, at the table. One of the Zen teachers turned towards the person offering the tea as if they were the most important person at that moment. Not all the august audience sitting next to him. He was really there for that person.

How do you meet your world? How do you meet your challenges? How do you meet the people in your life? The details of your life? What's your first response to difficulties you have? What about love? Rather than being the last response, what about the first response? What about respect? What happens if you treat everything as important? Your next breath? Your next in-breath – as if this is the important thing for this moment.

Whatever is in front of you, whatever the moment is, maybe it is the most important thing. Maybe it's nothing to be discounted, thrown away, or dismissed. What happens when we live a life when everything we encounter is the most important thing of that moment? Every person we meet is the most important? What happens if every challenge we meet is the most important challenge for you to have at that moment? And so to meet that with care and respect.

We see this on retreats a lot. Retreats are a very special place to be with yourself and practice. In that kind of environment, it's very clear – at least to me. It takes a while for the people going through it. But teachers have a different perspective. People have all kinds of things come up on retreat – all kinds of challenges that come up. It is just so great that we have this retreat environment to have challenges in. People think "Oh retreat. It's supposed to be a place to bliss out." I don't know what people think.

But maybe, "It's the easy route to Nirvana." So, if it's not Nirvana by 4 o'clock, it's probably not right. You're doing something wrong. But it's such a great place to have challenges of all kinds, because retreat is this optimal opportunity to meet it with respect, with love, with care. Maybe your challenge at that moment is the most important thing for you to have. You don't know what's working through you. You don't know what's being worked out. You really don't know what you need.

I remember there was a person on retreat many years ago who was having a very difficult retreat. So difficult that I, as a teacher, even thought, "Well, maybe this person shouldn't be on the retreat." This person had a lot of faith in the practice, really working hard. But I thought "I don't know about this." I held my tongue. I didn't say anything. About six months later the person came back and said "That was the most important retreat ever in my life. It was a really hard retreat. I learned how to be with difficulty. Then what happened was, in the last six months, I had all of these personal challenges in my life, and I was prepared. That prepared me." So, he didn't know when he was going through those difficulties how important those difficulties were going to be.

What if everything is important? Your challenges? The things that are most difficult for you? The difficult people in your life? To meet them with respect. They are important. To meet them with love. With good will. What would life be like if that's how we went through the day?

Those are my thoughts. Thank you all for coming. I appreciate all of you coming here. Hopefully you have some good challenges. And if you don't, that's good too.