

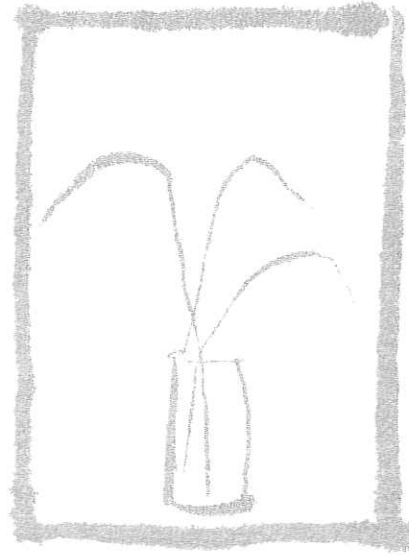
PART ONE

Traveling the Household

This worn-out carpet

recounts a thousand stories

as it unravels.



Form and Emptiness: Your Space and Possessions

Most children are fascinated with the idea of secrets. You may still remember the thrill you had as a child when you knew something others didn't. Learning to do magic tricks is another way to enjoy secrets. Children take great

delight in making things change and disappear, and in amazing an audience with such feats. Later, we all learn ways to envision and change ourselves. We experiment with myth and storytelling, and we develop, slowly, our own sense of what is useful and what is real. I can remember, as a child, lying on the living room floor, looking up at the ceiling, and trying to imagine our house being upside down. I would then be able to walk across the ceiling, and there would be much more room for me to move around. The furniture would all be stuck high overhead, out of the way. And I would have to step up gingerly, over foot-tall transoms, to pass through doorways. It was fun, even then, to invent a new way of doing things and to see the world a bit differently.

But even imagination has its limits. There are always areas and objects in our lives that remain hidden from view. Dogen said that there are mountains hiding everywhere, and that mountains are even "hidden in

hiddenness.” You will always find that there are things hidden from you throughout your life, but by picking up at least some of the loose ends around you, you begin to locate some of these hidden things. Your life becomes less scattered.

Let’s say you’re having company for dinner, and you haven’t been given much notice. At the last moment, you’re scurrying around, straightening up the house, and making things look clean and neat—you are trying to perform a magic act. You’re creating an illusion you wish were true. You don’t have time to really clean things, so you hit the highlights and concentrate on overall effect rather than wasting time attending to things people won’t see. In the context of this particular situation, when your time is limited, all of this rush and distraction are understandable.

But there are many and various places in our home we routinely give too little attention to, such as the bottom drawer of a desk or the top shelf of a closet. There is even a part of ourselves that we would just as soon forget completely. One of my Zen teachers once spoke about “the dog in the basement.” This rather wild and uncontrollable creature is the part of our persona that we prefer to keep confined and out of the sight of others. We commit it to some dark corner of our house and hope that it never gets loose. After all, negative things are loud and embarrassing. And we don’t know what might happen if this particular dog were to get out into the open, into the bright sunlight.

Part of our sense of order demands that we keep all “wild” things separate. Your yard may have a row of bricks or a wooden edging to distinguish the places you have cultivated from the areas that are weedy, raw, and undeveloped. But life is filled with other lines of demarcation that are invisible and ever changing. Faced with a complexity of decisions, most of us try to keep things under control, but this effort to control our situation can be an unending source of frustration and unhappiness. It seems that

some things just won't stay controlled or hidden. Maybe they have their own ideas about the way things should happen.

There is a great relief that comes from learning that we can simultaneously trust in ourselves and in other things. In fact, there is no difference between us and what we think of as "other." When our consciousness resonates with another object, we risk losing control; we open up and we achieve a new kind of compassion. And things begin to control themselves, without our intervention.

The history of the Buddhist term *sangha* illustrates the progression toward an all-inclusive perspective. Originally, it was used to describe those people who were fellow students and practitioners of Buddhism. It often conveyed a feeling of family and of gathering together in Buddhist study. Later, the definition of the word was expanded, by some, to include all sentient beings. Still later in Buddhist development, there were those who argued that the term should include all things, whether they were sentient or not. These people considered stones and sunlight, oceans and teapots, to be part of life's family and deserving of official membership and recognition in the *sangha*. And lastly, there were the real radicals, the ones who asked why there should be any limits or restrictions at all. They insisted that all things should be included in the *sangha*, *whether they existed or not!*

This may seem ridiculous to you when you first consider it, but does something really need to exist in order for us to take care of it? Don't we prepare the baby's room before the baby arrives? Or keep a loved one's picture even though the person has died? Don't we also care deeply for things that have become lost? Once again, there are ways you can expand your notions and your definitions of limits and boundaries. You can consider the things in your life in a very different way. You can turn the room on its head; you can bring things out into the open and unite with them.

When you're attempting to organize the things within your home, remember that patience and good humor may be your two best friends. Consider what happened to one of my friend's neighbors. This neighbor owned a pet raccoon, which was well cared for and lived in a pen specially built along one wall of the man's rather large apartment. One weekend, the neighbor was called out of town and left the animal alone, with ample food and water to last for several days. After the man had left, the raccoon learned a simple but interesting rule concerning man-made objects: Most things unscrew to the left. The fasteners on the pen opened this way, as did most of the handles and knobs on the drawers and cupboards throughout the apartment. Lightbulbs unscrewed this way. Faucet handles were also turned on in this manner. My friend's neighbor owned an old and expensive, manual typewriter, and the raccoon patiently unscrewed several connecting rods and other machined components and left them on the table. For two days, the busy animal proceeded in this way to quietly dismantle its owner's lodgings, achieving the same effect as a violent explosion in a very quiet and orderly fashion.

The neighbor's household had been carefully maintained and well-ordered. Only one thing had been out of place in his apartment, and that was the raccoon.

Samuel Beckett once said that our job is "to find a form that accommodates the mess." That can be quite a challenge! It's so easy to leave your things scattered in all directions. The day's mail, the half-full glass of fruit juice, the discarded sweater, and the uncapped pen are set down "temporarily." And then something else requires your attention. A few days later, you find yourself wondering: What happened? Where's my pen? And where did all of this *other stuff* come from? How do seemingly inanimate

objects migrate from one room to another? Am I living out the chaos theory here in my own life?

Suzuki Roshi said, "Everything should exist in the right place, in the right way. . . . When you do things in the right way, at the right time, everything else will be organized. You are the 'boss.' When the boss is sleeping, everyone is sleeping. When the boss does something right, everyone will do everything right, and at the right time. That is the secret of Buddhism."

Here are a few commonsense rules to follow when you start to put things away in your own home: Position shorter items in front of taller ones. Place lighter things on top of heavier ones. Protect the fragile object from hard, neighboring items that might harm it. Some things always have a tougher time of it than others.

Store each thing carefully, giving attention to the fact that there are differences between caring for something by putting it in a safe place and hoarding it or imprisoning it. Storing items poorly or forgetting about them is no different from abandonment. Even if something is being put away for a great length of time, visit it from time to time, remembering how it came to you, reminding yourself of its value, and checking on its condition. Make periodic inventories of any new possessions you've acquired. Lay them out and look at them. Don't be afraid to acknowledge mistakes you may have made in selecting them. Above all, don't ignore what you have.

When an object is stored away unseen, it faces the dangers of rust and mildew and other deterioration. Buddhist teachers have always counseled their students to keep things simple and in repair, to keep them sharp and shining, and ready to achieve their intended purpose, in a carefully chosen place. Be wary, they say, of the container that is more ornate and complicated than its contents.