

*This housecleaning day . . .*

*All gods and buddhas are left*

*sitting out on the grass.*

*—Masaoka Shiki*

Since moving out of Zen Center, I haven't done very well at keeping up with my Zen cleaning practice, so my house is rather messy. The lived-in quality is not something I hide. I don't mind people visiting and seeing the debris. Sometimes they express surprise or even disillusionment that a Zen teacher would live as I do. "This isn't my idea of a Zen house," they say. (On the other hand, some appear relieved not to have yet another high standard to live up to.) I live a life that works for me, and then again it doesn't. So I continue to examine the way I live and investigate alternatives.

If I want to rationalize the disarray in which I live, I tell people, "I'm an artist." Zen, it seems, has not yet arrived at my house, and I haven't figured out what to do with all the books, papers, computers, photos, cards . . . and stuff keeps arriving.

Recently, the manuscript for Gary Thorp's *Sweeping Changes* came in the mail. I found it to be sweet and endearing, alternately intoxicating and sobering. That Gary has discovered joy and fulfillment in everyday tasks is both an inspiration and a challenge. For his message is that we all have the potential to come alive through the ordinary, rather than waiting for something extraordinary to awaken our energy and passion. After I read Gary's manuscript, the first thing I wanted to do was tidy up. My latent house-keeping impulse went right to work. Then I returned to writing or brooding. Inspiration is everywhere, right at hand, whenever I choose to reach out. But that doesn't mean that I do.

Liberation means we do not stick to anything, whether it is messiness or cleanliness. We keep finding out how to live and realize that we have limitless choices.

Gil Fronsdal, who is both a Zen priest and a Vipassana (insight meditation) teacher, once spoke of practicing Zen in Japan and Vipassana in Southeast Asia. "Everyone," he said, "loves to rake." In Japan the advice is "When you rake, just rake," whereas in Southeast Asia it's "When you rake, watch your mind." So the monks in Japan work with energetic focus (sometimes stirring up unruly dust), while their counterparts can sometimes be found barely moving their rakes, being so watchful of feelings, thoughts, motives, intentions, sensations, emotions. When I told Mel Weitsman, another Zen teacher, about the Vipassana approach, his terse but amusing comment was, "They still think their minds are in their heads."

How will we spend our too-short lives?

The purpose of practicing Zen is not to experience, in the future, some wonderfully extraordinary event, but to realize that each moment of life is unique and extraordinary, and that each one of us is both quite ordinary and most miraculous. You learn that taking care of all the little details of your life really matters. Having the car serviced is better, both for the car and for you, than neglecting it. Attending to a dripping faucet helps the faucet, the sink, the water source, and yourself. When you give your attention and care to another being or object, your life slowly takes on another shape and begins to have more meaning than before. Your conception of time changes, and your actions become less hurried. And as you become less hurried, you begin to understand yourself a bit better.

Most musicians will tell you that the slow, simple pieces can actually be the most difficult to play. There is less room to cover up your mistakes, and there are fewer opportunities to dazzle the listener by showing off your technique. Each note becomes more resolute and has greater significance. It is in the performance of a romantic ballad, a tender lullaby, or a delicate pavane that the musician's inventiveness, control, and complexity have the potential to tell us the most about ourselves.

Although seated meditation (*zazen* in Japanese) remains the cornerstone of Zen study, we must also attend to all the other details of our lives, such as packing lunches and going to the bank and replacing the soap in the bathroom. Indeed, these everyday tasks, this maintenance of our surroundings—and even daily work for its own sake—are an integral part of Zen practice. In eighth-century China, the master Pai Chang (called Hyakujo in Japan) initiated the use of vigorous everyday work as an element of his teaching. He was not interested in entertaining dreamy-eyed philosophers or those seeking escape from the outside world. The monks who studied with him learned that understanding has its roots in the events of daily life, that action is one of the keys to serenity, and that wisdom resides within the ordinary.

The master teacher Eihei Dogen, who is credited with establishing Soto Zen in thirteenth-century Japan, often quoted an earlier teacher who said, "Working with the sleeves tied back is the activity of way-seeking mind." Dogen showed that by working with something, you can become intimate with its many facets and that this familiarity carries over into all other areas of your life. Along with sitting meditation, he emphasized the importance of how you live your everyday life, including your work, your leisure time, and your personal conduct.

Fortunately, studying Zen does not require you to be in a special place. Your own home will do nicely. Zen is everywhere: It is just beneath your feet; it is right in front of your face. You don't have to shave your head or think in exotic ways. There's no need to buy special tools or implements. Zen uses whatever is at hand. It uses not only robes, meditation cushions, incense, and bowing mats, but rags, buckets, brooms, sponges, and sandpaper. It is in the fishbowl and on top of the radio. It is in the action of picking up your shoes and placing them side by side. It's opening a jar or writing a check for the water bill.

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, told his students, "When you study Buddhism, you should have a general house-cleaning of your mind. You must take everything out of your room and clean it thoroughly. If it is necessary, you may bring everything back in again. You may not want many things, so one-by-one you can bring them back. But if they are not necessary, there is no need to keep them."

The literature of Zen is replete with references to housecleaning. There are stories of priests, monks, nuns, and laypeople dusting, sweeping, shining, polishing, and repairing. They attend to their windows, their doors, their robes, and themselves. They pour water, read letters, and worry about how much rice to cook for dinner. These activities are not somewhere beyond humanity but rather are integral to it. The intricacies and demands of daily life have no end. They are the very framework on which life is woven. And each thread is important in determining the quality of that life.