



## *The Idea of Maintenance*

Maintaining your home is demanding work. The fact that certain things must be done regularly, day in and day out, almost guarantees that you will approach them in a desultory and spiritless manner. You do housework as a matter of cleanliness, but you're also trying to preserve and protect your home and furnishings.

However, Buddhism teaches us that maintaining any consistent state of things is not possible: Everything will change, deteriorate, and disappear

eventually. All things are nonabiding. Everything you see might as well be stamped “temporary” and “ephemeral.”

No matter how carefully you treat the things you live with, there will come a day when the cupboard door will loosen and fall from its hinges, and when the chair you’re sitting in will start to give way. Your life and all that’s in it are simply on loan to you and are clearly precarious. Even your breath is fleeting, and every beat of your heart is transitory.

For me, the most exciting art forms have always been the “fugitive” ones, those that use real time as their arena, such as theater and live music. Anything can happen during a performance. Things may go amiss, or it can be one of those transcendental experiences. When you’re caught up in a spellbinding action on stage, or totally immersed in a clarinet sonata or jazz improvisation, you aren’t thinking about how everything will end. You don’t question the goal or the reason or the process of the work. You are *involved* at once with the actors or the musicians. There is nothing else, other than this beautiful moment that surrounds you. You are *moved* emotionally, with no thought of stopping time in order to preserve the experience.

In much the same way, Zen teachers have shown that we can make each instant of our lives vital and important. It is impossible to remove one single lightning flash of time, no matter how boring or unimportant it may seem, without annihilating all sense of present, past, and future. In fact, all time exists in this very moment. When you bring energy and attention into each of your activities, you are no longer engaged merely in maintenance. You’re still involved in taking care of things, but you bring this caring into an immediate and more creative plane. As you straighten up the medicine cabinet, you just roll back your sleeves and do your best. Sometimes when working in this way, intently and intimately in contact with some small task, you may start to sense the connectedness in things.

Indeed, all things on Earth are interconnected. Since the days of ancient Greece, there have been stories of Gaia, the earth mother and goddess of the world. Her name has been applied to the more recent scientific theories that regard Earth as a self-contained, complete, organic entity. Earth's rivers, creeks, and oceans function as a circulatory system, and its atmosphere is a kind of skin. Scientists are quick to point out that the health of the planet depends on forests, streams, microclimates, and clouds working together in balance. No small part of the earth is insignificant. There is nothing in nature that doesn't have purpose.

It might be interesting to look at your own home as an organic unit. The outer skin (the walls) contains water, heating, and air circulation systems. Inside, your basic living space can be altered by what you bring into it, in much the same way food acts upon your own body. Just as weather is determined by different pressure systems coming into contact with one another, the feelings generated in your home living space are determined by the things you place around you: the kind of music you listen to, the food you prepare, the relationships you foster, the books you read, and the dozens of other everyday choices you make. No small part of your home is isolated or insignificant. To have a healthy home, you need to have door hinges that don't squeak and a ceiling that doesn't leak when it's raining. You do what's required to help all things work as they were designed to work.

Some people go to such lengths to protect the items in their homes that they can't enjoy their surroundings. I once went with a friend to visit his parents, who lived in a very expensive six-room apartment on San Francisco's Nob Hill. All the furniture and decorative objects were expensive items of fine design. And every single thing in their home was covered in clear plastic! The lamp shades were in plastic bags, the couches and chairs had transparent vinyl coverings, and long plastic runners protected

the floors and carpets. I naively asked if they were painting the apartment. And my friend's mother seemed both impatient and offended as she told me that they were not, indeed, painting, and that this was the way things always were. I could hardly believe they lived this way. They sat and walked and ate on plastic and uncovered their beautiful possessions only when they held dinner parties every two months or so. The mother asked us if we might like to try one of the delicious oranges they had just brought from the market. My friend, her son, nodded his head. Then she asked him if he would mind eating it outside. So out the back door he went. The goddess Gaia must have been scratching her head that afternoon.

Please don't be compulsive about your home. You don't need to go through your house, armed with rags and scrapers, seeking out the enemy. Nor do you need to coat your life in protective plastic or antibacterial sprays. When you act out of compulsion, you lose the best of your intentions and weaken your own living experiences. It's fine to rinse and dry the kitchen sink, but don't fret over every pit and stain in the sink's surface. There is a Buddhist saying, "When we seek the Buddha in the mountaintops, we ignore the Buddha in the valley." In other words, when you become overly concerned with purity, self-image, and control, you run the risk of interfering with your own sense of well-being. You ignore your ability to relax and enjoy your own place of residence, and there will always be something sideways in your life.

The place where you live should reflect your true attitude, your true nature. Each room of your home, even a temporary motel room for that matter, can be imbued with personality. You can change or adjust the lighting, add flowers, arrange new elements, and improve conditions, in much the same way as the changing conditions of Gaia affect the climate and mood of the planet. By being in harmony with your surroundings, you will grow more comfortable with who you really are. Whether you're walking along the naturally occurring edge of a creek bed or the shining aisles of a supermarket, you can have a sense of unhurried order and trust in things.

Maintaining your home requires diligence. You develop the habit of continually caring for something you know will change. In spite of our bravest thoughts and actions, everything in our lives remains temporary. The joy comes not from trying to keep things forever, but from keeping them well.

quiet way, one of Buddhism's real heroes; she is a reminder to all who see her that it is important to listen and watch carefully, and to use whatever is at hand to provide aid and develop understanding.

Do you think of yourself as heroic? Do you see any real significance in changing a tire or in bundling together month-old newspapers? Thich Nhat Hanh once wrote in one of his journals: "Washing the dishes and cooking are themselves the path to Buddhahood. . . . Only a person who has grasped the art of cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, and chopping wood, someone who is able to laugh at the world's weapons of money, fame, and power, can hope to descend the mountain as a hero. A hero like that will traverse the waves of success and failure without rising or sinking. In fact, few people will recognize him as a hero at all."

Many people feel that they never even have the opportunity to descend the mountain at all, let alone become heroes. For them, their entire life consists of climbing and striving to reach a higher peak or plateau. And they also see themselves as being buried in an avalanche of unending routine. (But the word *routine* originally meant "a route or course of travel for trading," or "a religious pilgrimage," and has only more recently come to mean "ordinary" or "of no special quality.")

In fact, nothing in your life is ordinary. There is no ordinary breath or heartbeat; there is no ordinary force of gravity; there is no ordinary birth or death. *Natural*, yes—but never ordinary. In a certain sense, just living your life *does* engender a type of courage, especially when you're fully aware of all the others who are in it with you. Listening to your friends is sometimes not that easy to do. Lending someone a hand may interfere with your own ideas of how the day should be spent. This is why Kannon finds herself in garden settings, at crossroads, and ensconced in people's kitchens, all invaluable vantage points for gaining a broader perspective. She is with us as we hear the sounds of the world's suffering, as well as its music and its "routine" sounds of daily life. As we wash our vegetables, she hears the rustling of our actions and comes to our assistance. The work goes easier, and then she's gone. Who knows who the heroes are? Maybe someday each of us will descend the mountain and begin to see the value in all of our sweeping and washing, the open promise of each day.