

## TAKE CARE OF THE THREADS

Reverend  
Zuiko Redding  
finds that our practice  
is in the details.



Dogen Zenji,  
the founder of Soto  
Zen, speaks of  
“menmitsu no kafu,”  
taking care of  
everything we  
touch in our lives  
with a gentle and  
considerate  
approach,  
as if it were  
buddha we were  
interacting with.

**A** friend in Japan once told me, "When life feels totally hopeless, just empty your wastebasket." I started doing that and it worked. I've branched out now. When I feel totally overcome by life in general, I select one small thing and do it—wash the dishes, file the papers on my desk, empty the wastebasket. It always works. Of course, all my problems are not solved, but I have a better feeling about them. At least the wastebasket isn't cluttered anymore. I have more space and I'm more optimistic and motivated.

It's useful to start small in dealing with our lives. Just select one detail and work on that. With one detail I feel that "Yes, I can do that. That's pretty easy." It's one small step in dealing with the fearsome monster. I become encouraged that I have more power than I'd thought.

Our teachers at Shogoji often said that our Soto Zen practice was *menmitsu*—closely woven like cotton fabric. They told us to take care of the threads—the details—and life would take care of itself. In fine cotton cloth the threads are almost invisible. Each thread is weak and insignificant by itself. When they are woven together, all those small, weak threads make a large, strong piece of cloth. This is how we weave our lives - tiny thread by tiny thread. Each seems too small to bother with, but together they make a life.

Looking at the total situation—the huge piece of cloth to be made—can overwhelm us. We may allow our feelings of impatience and powerlessness to stop us in our tracks. Looking at what we have to do to get to some future place, it seems impossible. We don't want to do it. If, instead of living in the future or the past, we just weave the next thread, our ideas and emotions lose their power over us.

I sometimes feel this way when I see what has happened to our planet in just the space of my memory and when I read accounts of the devastation caused by our greed, aversion and delusion.

I find myself grieving that I may spend the last days before my death in a world where people can no longer look forward to a better life, but to one in which the crabs that were cheap and plentiful in my Gulf Coast childhood may be extinct in a short while. I feel myself turning away because it seems I can do nothing to stop this.

Yes, on the grand scale, that may be true. On the scale of menmitsu it is not. I can refuse to buy food made with scarce species of plants and animals. I can repair broken things rather than buy new ones. I can recycle paper, plastic and such. I can write letters and sign petitions. Though it's very small, those small things accumulate.

There is also the power of example. Visitors to Zen Center see our recycling and are encouraged to petition their own community leaders to begin providing curbside recycling.

It's a matter of just putting the next thread in place. No matter how small, each one is equally important. All are connected, woven together, to make something strong, resilient, flexible. Each thread affects the strength of the whole cloth. We can do this when we can turn away from our concern with past and future and our concern with self and focus on just this moment with patience and wholeheartedness.

**W**ith all those small acts we build a deep habit of dealing with the world with awareness and generosity. We also build our attitude and effort - we turn toward being effective in this moment and away from depression, powerlessness and grief. Acknowledging and putting aside our judgments and fears, we just do the next thing we can do. There's no worrying about being rewarded—there's just doing what we do because this is what's best in this moment. Not letting the water run unnecessarily when washing dishes might help the world or it might not. It doesn't matter—not wasting water is our habit. This turning of the tap is what we do.

When we don't expect anything, we can keep going. If we expect things and don't get them, our effort weakens. If we don't expect, our effort will always be strong. Returning to the wholehearted pursuit of what this moment is asking of us, we can feel peace and steadiness. The whole universe comes forward to assist us with our efforts.

Knowing this, we can put aside our thoughts and expectations and let this moment be just this moment—deal with this one thread. Let's weave each strand that comes before us into the warp and woof of our lives, with the peace and steadiness that comes with just paying attention.

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