

PERSPECTIVE
ALL THINGS ARE INTERCONNECTED
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For a long time I have believed that victory in our Buddhist practice often comes in different responses to ordinary moments. Something that happened recently made me realize this once more.

We have the fortune of having a wonderful person named Maria to help us clean our house every two weeks. She loves to clean, is totally reliable and has great integrity. She taught me a lesson about life the other day when she came to me and said, “Your plants are very sad.” I found it a little unusual that she attributed human emotions to my plants, yet I could feel her deep sense of compassion for them.

I felt an immediate pang of guilt. I had just returned from a business trip and noticed leaves all over the floor as well as several plants whose leaves had yellowed and others with leaves turning brown around the edges. I told Maria that it was Roy’s fault. Before I left on my trip I had asked him to keep an eye on the plants and water them if needed. He hadn’t done it.

In this case I had a scapegoat. Even so, my general approach to our 40-odd houseplants is that I expect them to look beautiful and enhance our environment with minimal care on my part. My strategy is to wait until they are about to croak, and then throw a little water in their general direction. Misting, repotting and fertilizing are not part of my approach. In fact, my general philosophy has been “no big deal.” If I have a casualty now and then I can replace it for \$5.99 at the local nursery. I have been heard laughingly to say: “If plants survive in my house, they really have to have a strong will to live.” For example, I have a plant that I brought with me when we moved here from Florida 23 years ago. It has managed to survive being watered twice monthly and was repotted for the first time one year ago.

Maria happens to be a person who “cares” for plants. She has scolded me in the past and has taken some of my plant cast-offs and nursed them back to health. On this occasion I muttered something to the effect that I can’t always seem to remember to water the plants, but she didn’t let me off the hook. She followed up with the simple question, “Why?” Wanting to defend myself, I asked her in return, “Don’t you ever forget to water your plants?” Her reply, “No, they are just like us. They need food and water. I keep an eye on them all the time to see what they need.” She was right on. I knew that my approach to plant care was callous, to say the least.

The next morning I re-read President Ikeda’s “New Year’s Poem” and I came across these words: “All things are interconnected”— / This is an underlying principle of ecological thought / And also the insight of Buddhism. / All life on this blue planet of water— / No, the entire universe itself—is a single living entity. / Even the most microscopic being is an important part of the whole. / The world is in need of a deeply religious spirit (Jan. 1 *World Tribune*, p. 3).

At that moment, I realized that Maria, a devout Catholic from Mexico, was much more of a Buddhist than I. I also began to make comparisons between how I approached my plants and other aspects of my life, such as my role as a Buddhist leader. I realized that sometimes I wait until members are distressed (wilted, turning brown around the edges or losing their leaves) before I take action to help them. Also, at times I don’t continue

“caring” for them by following through with ongoing supportive action. I can’t say that I “always watch them to see what they need” like Maria does with her plants.

I was considering how I could replace my callous attitude toward my plants and other things in my life when I came across President Ikeda’s later words in the same poem. He seemed to be speaking directly to me when he said: “Let us now, with renewed commitment, / Plant in people’s hearts the seeds of trust and friendship, / The seeds of philosophy and happiness, / The seeds of peace! / In our immediate environments, / Let us spread gardens of peace, / Green and full of flowers, / With deep prayer and patience!”(Ibid., p. 3).

Thank you, Maria and President Ikeda, for your timely wisdom — and for reminding me that ordinary aspects of life are important. My new determination is to have a deeper understanding of the statement “All things are interconnected.”