

Edward Brown afternoon lecture
during one day sitting at Green Gulch Farm
July 18, 2018

So this afternoon I wanted to—I'd like to start by telling you a story that is—actually it is a story in my book *No Recipe*. And that, by the way—there are a few copies over here if you want to get them from me. All right.

But when I first started cooking, I was twenty-one years old and I was—I started working as a dishwasher and—at Tassajara the last year it was a resort. I had been practicing Zen for a year and then I got a job at Tassajara. And the cooks were making really great bread, so I asked them if they'd teach me. And they said, "Sure." So then I was the dishwasher, the pot scrubber, and the baker. And halfway through that summer one of the cooks quit, so the owners, Bob and Anna Beck, said, "Why don't you cook?" And I said, "Oh, okay." And, within a day or two, I realized I had cook's temperament.

As the dishwasher, I was calm and tranquil and just baked and did my work and took long breaks in the afternoon. And then suddenly I was screaming at people. So—and they had to have meetings: *what are we going to do about Ed?* And basically the answer is to say to me, "Do you want to change the way you're working and how you do this or would you like another job?"

If you're famous enough and high-powered enough, you can be temperamental, too, and they let you do it because you're such a genius. But I was the new boy in the kitchen, so—and not considered much of a genius—so I didn't have any slack that way. So I've studied, since then, cook's temperament, so I can tell you a lot about that, but that's not the subject of today's talk.

I want to tell you about when I—that I made—I tried out making biscuits and the biscuits just didn't come out right. So I thought, *well maybe it's because I'm—these biscuits are made with milk—well, actually with milk, and I thought maybe I'll make them with water.* And they still didn't come out right, and then I thought *maybe it's the eggs. Maybe I should try making the biscuits without the eggs.* And they didn't come out right. And then I thought *well maybe it's the butter and I maybe just should use some Crisco and maybe the biscuits will come out the way I—they should.* And they still didn't come out right. So I think it was three—at least three times, maybe four. And finally it occurred to me: *right compared to what?*

How's your life going? Is it coming out right? Compared to what picture? Compared to what image of how your life should be? And I realized, *oh my, I grew up with Pillsbury and Bisquick and my biscuits don't taste like either Pillsbury or Bisquick.* And this is the same with the pictures of our life. We get these pictures when we're anywhere from two months to five years maybe of what we need to be doing so that our life comes out right. I don't know. Occasionally there's pictures that come up a

little bit later, but our pictures are pretty old about the kind of life. And how do we get to be more like the picture we have, the story that biscuits should come out, the way my life should come out?

With Bisquick, you took the powder from the box and you put it in the bowl and you mix in milk with a fork and then you took your fork and you just went *flop, flop*. You take some of the batter and whap it onto the baking pan. You didn't need any butter on your baking pan. You just baked them. And then the biscuit—the Pillsbury, of course—you rapped the can on the corner of the counter, twisted it open, took out the biscuits.

And my biscuits didn't taste like Pillsbury or Bisquick. What can you do? So I thought, *you know what? Why don't I set aside the pictures I have of how biscuits should come out from a long time ago? These are outdated pictures. And why don't I taste the biscuits of today? Why don't I make these biscuits and see what these biscuits taste like without comparing to any picture?*

And they were magnificent. They were flaky and they were very high and you could open them up without a knife. And then you could put butter in there. They're very hot. And you could put even more butter in than there was butter in the biscuits. And they were flaky. They were light. They melted in your mouth. They were heavenly. They were sunny. They were made with whole-wheat flour. They were earthy. They were wheaty. They were so magnificent and then.... It was awesome. The biscuits of today.

So we have this kind of—any time you can stop and taste the biscuits of today. And when we sit here with meditation, how are the biscuits today? And the interesting thing, of course, is they're so much better when you're not comparing to some outdated picture of what you were aiming for or what meditation should be or what my life was going to be and the kind of recognition I would get or the kind of approval or respect or.... And when you—the more you can just simply see what your experience is, you're—we're each of us a human being. We're just people. Nothing special. And yet we're also—"just people" also means just spirit, just soul. And it may not look like much on Facebook.

It's gotten so bad now that sometimes, apparently, teenagers are committing suicide because their picture of themselves on Facebook is not—does not measure up to other people's pictures of themselves. I don't know. I'm refusing to go on Facebook. I have—my partner Margot's on Facebook and I talked to my friend John the other day. John Simpkins lives in Andrews, Oregon. He's the one resident of Andrews, Oregon. He lives in an abandoned schoolhouse. He lives in the—it's not the parsonage. It's the "teacherage." And then in the schoolhouse he paints. So his paintings are 8x8 or whatever and they're stunning images that I would never think of or anything. And he's got a show coming up in November in Bend, Oregon. And he said, "Ed, I've got three thousand friends on Facebook now." That's his social life. He lives by himself. He has a poodle.

Audience: Ella!

Huh?

Audience: Ella!

Is Ella the new poodle?

Audience: Yeah.

Okay. Yeah. He did a beautiful—you saw the other book of his first—his other poodle. Yeah. He had a—huh?

Audience: Phoebe.

Phoebe? Phoebe. Yeah. Phoebe was the—his poodle died and he was completely bereft for weeks and then he finally got another poodle. He thought when the poodle—first poodle—died (Phoebe) that—and he did a book about *Phoebe and Me*. It's such a sweet book about how much you can love a dog and how much a dog can love you and—in the middle of the Andrews desert—in the middle of whatever desert it is where Andrews, Oregon, is. And near his house is—there's a playa. It goes on for miles.

And when we visited, every so often he would just go like “Ah!” I need to look outside.” And there would just be this spectacular light or something and he'd go running out with his camera and.... So in some ways, okay, that's a picture of a life. He does paintings. But on the other hand, he's just another person and doing the best he can and drinking espressos. He gets most of his food and stuff from UPS or Federal Express—FedEx—because it's a long ways to the grocery store. About every two hours a car drives by out on the road.

So when we can allow it, we can receive support. We can receive warmth, love. We can sit here—Suzuki Roshi called—in Zen, we have more the terminology of Big Mind. We sit in Big Mind. And Big Mind, he said, is always on your side. And Big Mind is distinguished from monkey mind. Monkey mind runs around trying to get this and not get that and get out of this and.... And he said, it's not the point. And when monkey mind is quiet, then Big Mind resumes itself. Then Big Mind is more obvious. But Big Mind is not coming or going.

So we sit—this is like the Rumi poem I've told you at some point today:

This we have now
is not imagination,
not a grief or a joy.
This is not a judging state,

not a sorrow or an elation.
Those come and go.
This is the Presence
that doesn't.
When grapes turn to wine,
they're wanting this.
What else could human beings want?
The night sky is nothing
but a crowd of beggars swirling past,
and they all want some of this,
this we have now.
This we have now
created the world and our bodies, not that
our bodies and the world created this.

So some sense of sitting in this big space. So most of the time we're creating little projects like making biscuits: *I will quiet my mind. I will stop my thinking. I will become calm. I will do this. I will do that.* And we create little projects. And, of course, nowadays it's important to keep up on your email and your Facebook. And it gives you something to do to pass the time and to be moderately productive. So it's not so often that we have this kind of occasion to sit and just—and not have any devices and not have any projects. Or we have projects that we realize after a while aren't so important after all and we could just sit here with a human being, with a goodhearted, tenderhearted person that we are, see how we're doing, see what's happening.

Again, as the Derek Wolcott poem says,

One day
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
each will smile at the other's greeting
saying, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who's loved you
all your life, who you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.

So it's not so often we just sit and we—you can actually taste the moment, today. The biscuits of today. Your life of this moment without comparing so much to what it should look like on Facebook or wherever it is or in your mind, without much comparison and just being friends with yourself finally—being kind and tender and tenderhearted, gentle with yourself.

In some ways, my favorite story about this is when we were at Tassajara and we had tea with Suzuki Roshi. And after we had our tea, it's quiet and the tea is served and then, in Zen, you pick it up with two hands—the tea. You always have one hand underneath the cup, one hand on top of the cup, and then—because two hands—you put two hands on one object, it focuses your attention.

It's not like a cocktail party and like "Oh yes, and then we just got back from Greece," and your wine glass waves around and you....

It's—here it is and you honor it and you sip your tea. And Roshi said then, after a little bit, "Does anybody have any questions?" And right away someone said, "Roshi, why haven't you enlightened me yet?" And I thought, *that's not very respectful kind of question to ask*. It's a little bit like saying, "What—are you really a Zen teacher? Do you not have any skill? Do you not have any capacity to do this? What's your problem? And why are you—are you holding out on me? What's the deal?" Anyway he said, "I'm making my best effort." It was so sweet. I'm making my best effort.

And over the years I think and think about—this story comes back to me and—because sometimes I would be sitting and I'd think, *why can't I have a better experience? Why can't I have something more enlightening?* And I'm kind of—you start demanding of your own body, your own mind: *come up with something better for me*. And, if you listen carefully and it's your taste in this moment and not just busy telling your body/mind what it needs to do to make you happy supposedly, you hear your body, your mind, your being saying, *I'm making my best effort. I give you things to see, things to smell, things to taste, things to touch. I give you thoughts to think. I give you feelings to feel. Hey! I'm making my best effort. And what were you looking for? What old biscuits did you have in mind?*

So our body, our being is very faithful, very true this way: always making its best effort. And then we have various habits. Sometimes we're more like shaming yourself. We say to our self, "Is that the best you can do?" We're pretty hard on ourselves sometimes, so it's not that—how do we get more out of our self—but how do we stop demeaning our self that way? How do we stop talking to our self like that and start saying, "Thank you for your effort. Thank you for doing your best. Thank you for giving me things to see and smell and taste and touch. Thank you for giving me things to think."

Another example of this: one of my favorite Zen poems is a poem by Hakuin, who is quite a well-known Zen teacher in Japan in the sixteenth century, I think, considered to be the most famous of the last five hundred years in Japan and six major enlightenments and eighteen minor ones, but who's counting? *Why don't I get any of those? Couldn't you share some?* Anyway, he wrote a poem one time that said:

The demon outside pushes at the door.
The demon inside holds it fast.
They struggle fiercely all through the day,

sweat pouring from head to toe.
They battle on all through the night
until at last in the morning light
laughter fills the air.
They were friends from the start.

Unfortunately, sometimes that battle through the night is about ten years or twenty or forty before we realize *oh, we've always been friends*. We don't need to try to get our self to perform better. We're learning how to be supportive and listening to our self and receiving our self at our own door, in our own mirror. Tenderhearted feeling for yourself.

So one last story. I mentioned Danny early on, and Danny one year went to a *sesshin* in Berkeley—hours and hours of sitting every day at the Berkeley zendo—Zen Center. And it's the big *sesshin*. It's the first week of December. *Rohatsu sesshin* it's called. And he said, "Ed, it never got easier." Oftentimes in *sesshin* the third or fourth day it kind of gets as bad as it going to gets and then it gets better and better and you kind of—often you kind of just breeze through the last few days. Your body and everything has gotten used to sitting and whatever. And he said, "It never got any easier. But I realized I could be kind to myself and I could be tender and I could be gentle and I could be compassionate with myself in the midst of all this difficulty."

So—big shift from *can't you just do this so that I have a good time*—to your knees, to your body. *Stop it! Stop hurting! Stop that! Be...* Instead, having some kind, tender feeling: *sweetheart, it hurts, doesn't it? Yeah. That's too bad. And I'm going to sit here with you and I'm not going to abandon you. I'm not going anywhere while you're in this pain. I'm not going to go anyplace. I'm going to sit here with you. I'm going to be with the pain you have.*

And you start—and this is not abandoning yourself. You're going to be with yourself through the difficulty and through the pain with some gentle, kind feeling. And a lot of our life—it's not about a better performance. It's just learning to be kind and sweet with ourselves because it's hard. This life is difficult and, as you know, it may get more so. We don't know.

Okay. Thank you.

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