

# The Zen of Gardening: Less Is More

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In 2015, after living abroad for some time, I returned to my family's land in Kampung Serukam, Sungai Petani, Malaysia. I started to take care of the land and practice regenerative farming. When I first arrived, it looked run down and rubbish was strewn everywhere in the village. Because there's no rubbish collection truck that comes into the village, the villagers decided the fastest disposal method is to burn everything.

Each day at sunset, everyone in the village does open burning. I saw my family doing the same thing and strongly felt that they should stop. However, in Asian culture, it's very difficult to tell our elders what they should do. So, one evening when my granduncle was burning rubbish, I just took a bucket of water, poured it on the fire, extinguishing it. He was not happy but didn't say anything. As a result of my interventions, he stopped his daily rubbish

burning. If we allow ourselves to pause, we can see what is really happening.

Our farmland had a history of farming using chemicals and pesticides. When I got back, I wanted to practice organic and regenerative farming. In a small village like ours, nobody understood what that was. But they were very happy to just try it. We stopped using all kinds of chemicals in the farm. The first thing that we saw was a lot of the old fruit trees started to slowly die off. My family had a panic attack: "This organic way is not working at all!"

However, we didn't give up and instead we tried again. We planted a lot of new trees and eventually the new trees thrived and still survive today. My family could then better accept this new way of farming.

We also started planting some new garden beds to produce some food for ourselves. The first season we planted a lot of long beans because they are nitrogen fixing plants. After three months, the long beans started to fruit. We were so happy! But then, just before harvest time, it all got eaten by pests. Again, my family's doubts resurfaced and they again said, "This organic way is not working!"

But I insisted that we keep trying. In the second season, we planted long beans again. There were pests but we allowed them stay there. We didn't use any natural pest spray such as an enzyme-based repellent. We let nature do what she needed to do. What we saw was the pests attracted natural predators. However, they were not enough to overcome the problem and we still had nothing to harvest in our second season.

We decided to try again for a third season and said to ourselves, "Let's plant long beans again!" This time we again observed the same pest-predator situation. But we managed to have enough harvest for ourselves and even a little bit extra to sell in the market.

Finally, in the fourth season, there were no more problems as we arrived at an ecological balance. The pests became our best teacher—nature needs time to balance itself. We always want to fix something, but in order to give ourselves a chance to see things clearly, we may have to do less. In other words, less is more. It is actually just what we are doing in meditation. We are pausing our thinking, giving ourselves a chance to actually see what is happening.

When we talk about gardening, a lot of people are scared of weeds. If you ever come to our farm, you'll see that it is full of grass and weeds. What I noticed was that in each season, a different weed variety marches in. For

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Photo: Haeng Won Zen Centre

burning.

One day after about a year later, he came up to me and said, "Wow! Today I passed by our neighbor's place and I saw them burning plastic the way I used to do. Actually, it smells really badly!" Even though he had been burning plastic and trash for thirty years, he had been not aware that the burning smelled that bad. After he stopped, he was able to see and smell what was happening. In my second year on the farm he said, "Today I saw the neighbors burning plastic again and I went to tell them that it's not good to do it."

We are so busy in our heads that sometimes we don't see what is happening. If we don't take a moment to pause, we will always try to do something instead of just allowing

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example, in one season a lot of lalang weed will appear. This means the soil needs deep tap roots to break it up. After that it could be mimosa that becomes the dominant variety, which tells us that the soil needs nitrogen. Each season brings with it a different weed variety. We call this the succession of ecology; when one type of grass finishes taking care of what the soil needs, another type will take over. This is the cycle of nature.

We didn't even have to buy organic fertilizer for our fruit trees. Nature provides a built-in abundance to regenerate the soil. Many times through farming, I learned that to do less is doing more. When we do less or pause, we get less involved with what is happening in our head. We will get to see how rich life is. There's more in life than what we think there is. And that realization comes from doing less.

I first met Myong An Sunim at a monthly organic farmers market. Every time he saw me, he would invite me to practice meditation. He invited me for a year but I never went. I knew that Hoyyee, a farmer friend in Penang, went weekly to practice meditation at the Zen center.



Photo: Haeng Won Zen Centre

When I started to give healing massages at her home, she said, "Let's go together to practice with Sunim." I didn't hesitate about going. After practicing for many times, I experienced an improvement in my life. Most of the time at the farm, I have to take care of people, plants, income and everything else related to the farm. My mind becomes busy easily and it's often difficult to settle down. I'm always thinking of how to finish everything.

When I started to practice meditation, I realized that if we just pay attention, it's easy to do things one by one. I attend to one thing at a time. Only after one thing is done do I move on to another. Meditation helps me in paying attention and breathing so that I am able

to enjoy things from moment to moment. Nowadays, when I visit my mother, she often comments that I look brighter and healthier. I believe that it stems from "less is more." ♦

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Xin Tong founded and lives on Serukam Organic Farm in Sungai Petani, Malaysia.

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long as they used to. When I was able to see them, they went away quicker than before. I guess that it was one indicator for me to know that my life was getting better and clearer.

We moved out of my parents' home to an urban home farm. It became a place for us to practice and train, learning to work with nature within the environment of the city and society. Bit by bit, without realizing it, we had begun turning a piece of abandoned land into an urban educational farm.

One day, like a bombshell, some incidents involving my family and life blew up in my face at the same time. I didn't know what to do. Then, ahhh, I recognized that it was the same challenge again. I thought I had practiced well and could handle things, but like a really bad storm, it blew me back to square one again. I began to lose faith in myself and my practice; my emotions were churning up and down even though I was trying my best to keep practicing.

I started to walk out the door, legs heavy with despair. Just as I came out into the sun, I saw a yellow flower blooming in my garden; it was from a seed that I planted some time ago. I couldn't believe it still bloomed even though I had put it in a tiny container. At that moment, I suddenly became present with the flower. In that same moment, I was able to return to my breath and my body and a feeling of hope came flowing back. I realized that the seed grows, the flower blooms, I just breathe and life just goes on.

As a farmer, it's easy to see that the climate is changing for

the worse and the news is telling us that many living beings are suffering. Like them I have suffering too. I remembered one of the Facebook posts sharing a conversation that Zen Master Seung Sahn had with his students, "Seeing all this coming, what can we do? Where can we hide?"

Zen Master Seung Sahn replied, "Hide under the path."

This teaching keeps reminding me, moment to moment, to take refuge in the path.

What will happen next? Don't know. The seeds of Zen have been planted, so I just keep on going, keep on living. What is the purpose of life? I thought I knew before, but now, I just don't know. I have learned that life is often unpredictable, just as in nature; the sun shines one moment and rain falls the next. After it stops, a rainbow appears, a breeze blows the clouds away and the sun shines again. Through it all, the trees keep growing, dropping their seeds onto the soil, continuing the cycle of life of the mother tree. Trees, vegetables, fruits, flower, weeds, seeds, chickens, ducks, dogs, cats, sky, earth, people; all things around us are our teachers.

I try to keep faith in myself to grow with nature and to practice, practice, practice. To me, it is the only way to learn how to dance in the rain. Supporting ourselves with practice is also a way of supporting our friends, family and nature. ♦

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Hoyyee and her partner, Pop, founded an urban educational farm and teahouse on the island of Penang, Malaysia.