

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

November-December 2020



The Sangha Reflects

For this issue of the newsletter, the practice leaders asked sangha members to contemplate two questions: What is one thing of significance you have learned in your practice this year, and what is your aspiration going forward? Alternatively, participants were invited to consider what they felt grateful for this year. Our thanks go to all who responded. Here are their voices:

At the start of the pandemic, I was very anxious about returning to work in the emergency room and was able to take time off due to my age and being in a high-risk category. I worried and was somewhat convinced that my colleagues were upset and angry with me. These thoughts were persistent and frequent. When I did return to work, I realized that these negative thoughts were “believed thoughts” and my colleagues were not at all angry or upset with me. This was a great lesson about not believing my thinking even when my anxious gut makes it feel real.

Naturally enough, other strong thoughts have emerged since then, and knowing my proclivity to get caught in a negative belief cycle, I try to recognize the believed thoughts, feel the body, soften the heart and

Guest Teacher

Visiting Elihu

Genmyo Smith, of the Prairie Zen Center, will be joining us (virtually) for our regular Wednesday program on December 2. All are welcome to attend.

December

Sesshin Applications are now being accepted for the online December sesshin, 12/28–12/31. The suggested donation is \$45–\$100. Scholarships are available for those in financial need. Please apply here if you would like to participate.

Matching Donations

Some members of our ZCSD community have anonymously offered to match donations to the Center up to \$2,000. They will match your

see what is in front me. ~

One simple practice has been surprisingly helpful for me during this tumultuous year: At the end of my loving kindness meditation each morning, I silently remind myself that I can never get *this* day back, encouraging me to embrace each moment rather than obsess over the past or worry about the future. My aspiration going forward is to maintain the power of this practice. ~

My practice this year has led me to see the mental game of tug of war between seemingly opposing thoughts and emotions that often leaves me feeling angry, happy, sad, confused, or, above all, exhausted. I may have "understood" the illusory nature of this perpetual game before, but it wasn't until this year that I actually felt it, on the cushion and in daily life. Practicing letting go of the proverbial rope has at times left me feeling uncomfortable and empty, but it's also given me a clearer, broader, richer perspective on life that I look forward to growing.

I've found I have infinite opportunities for judgments, positive and negative, none of which seem to broaden my perspective or to serve life (mine or anyone else's). So my practice aspiration is to continue developing the calm, vigilant, perpetual awareness of my own judgments and the physical sensations they are associated with. ~

If, during my hectic life, someone had offered me a whole year of being home, having time to meditate, read, study, paint, walk, do yoga, it would have sounded very attractive. Well, the gift came "wrapped in a newspaper." My practice has grown in this time: daily sitting with no excuses; more reading, hearing and Zooming with Buddhist teachers; more accepting life as it is. Being present and enjoying every bit of it. Maintaining awareness during my walks, observing my thoughts and judgements and being grateful. My principal practice is

donation dollar for dollar, so even a small donation will have double the impact on the Center. ZCSD relies on donations to help support our practice. The Coronavirus pandemic has put a strain on both our expenses and our income. For many of us, practice through ZCSD has been transformative in our lives. Your support is most appreciated. You can donate online via PayPal by going to <http://zencentersan-diego.org/news/> or send a check to 2047 Felspar Street, San Diego, CA 92109-3551. You can become a monthly donor or make a one-time gift. Donations to ZCSD as a non-profit organization may be tax-deductible.

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***I am
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"loving kindness to myself, family, teachers, Sangha, and all sentient beings." ~

I recently had the experience of an unexpected diagnosis of a potentially life-threatening medical condition in the family that required major surgery within two weeks and had possible outcomes ranging from complete cure to fatal illness. A number of things came up for me. Of course, I was very anxious, frequently to the point of feeling overwhelmed by it.

Practice was very helpful to me in responding to the anxiety, allowing me to feel it and, at the same time, experience it within the wider space of the present moment. This was further helpful in allowing me to assist with all of the things that needed to be done before the surgery.

The other thing that emerged for me during this period was a clearer understanding that all of the disturbances of my daily life—the pandemic, the election, and many others—are perturbations on the surface of a much deeper fullness of being. I was grateful that, even in the midst of what felt like a crumbling of my world, I was still able to taste the sweet strawberry of being alive. In the end, the surgery was successful and provided a complete cure for the illness.~

The most important part of my practice is Sitting. I have learned to persevere in sitting still with the stormy waves of thoughts and emotions. I have learned that thoughts and emotions come and go. I have learned that I have a choice whether to react, to feed my thoughts and emotions, or just to notice them and let them dissolve into my breath, sometimes liberating my suffering and clarifying my confusion, leading me to a space of well-being. I trust the inner voice, the inner guidance. I have learned that I can stop looking to feel good, knowing that life is what it is, with its many seasons, sometimes peaceful and sometimes difficult and disheartening.

My aspiration is to be in touch with compassion within myself, to be gentle and

caring to myself. I will then be more able to share such Loving Care with those I encounter.

I am grateful to have practice to hold me and steady me, to have my inner voice to guide me, to have the Sangha and the teachers to support my practice.~

My practice this year has often involved anxiety, fear, and anger around the political situation and COVID-19. I watch my tendency to criticize and ridicule others, to indulge in polarized thoughts. One practice technique that helps with this is "Just Like Me"; to notice that my thoughts and behaviors are often the same that I find objectionable in others: intolerant, quick to judge, self-righteous, gloating with like-minded friends, and so on. And, just like me, those others experience anxieties and fears that are very real and painful to them. We all share the fear and pain of losing, whether in politics or to sickness.~

As my usual routines have fallen away in the isolation mandated by the pandemic, practice has helped me to stay centered and balanced. It has provided a way to come back to presence—staying with the body and not getting too caught up in thought. I can notice when I am on automatic pilot. That was especially important as the election counting continued day after day.

My aspiration is to continue sitting at least once a day, doing a menu practice with a different menu item each day, and writing in my gratitude journal.~

I am grateful for my fellow practitioners who are steady and disciplined. Regardless of what may be going on in their minds, they show up. Much of the time during this period, my practice has been skittish; their presence has provided me with a beacon, a base. I am grateful that, whether we know it or not, we practice for each other.~

I've learned to start over each day, to pay attention to the basics. This experiencing of life itself, moment by moment, is always there to rely on. My aspiration for 2021 is to ask at the beginning of each day, "Will this be a day of practice?" And at the end of each day to ask, "Was I, somehow, a beneficial presence?"~

The path to loving-kindness will always entail our gentle attention to the very things that block our way to it.