

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

January-February 2021



Thoughts Are Part of the Scenery

By the time we turn up at a zen center, most of us have some sense that an obsession with thinking does not serve life well. We may not yet know an alternative to living in our thoughts, we may not have examined our fixed beliefs and opinions, but it has likely become clear that we can chase ourselves around in an endless warren of thought until we are exhausted. By then, no doubt, the body is tense, and there may be resentment: Why, we ask—when we work so hard to do the right thing, to serve others, to be the best we can be—do we feel distressed? Is there no joy? What is hindering a true appreciation for life?

Zen practice restores balance. It shows us that we can be present in life, with intelligence and a gladness of heart, without thinking. And yet, the instruction is not to cast out thought, not to forbid it, but rather to learn not to be mesmerized by it, to come to see it for what it is, one phenomenon within the family of phenomena, the universe of phenomena, that comprise our life.

If you are new to practice, it may concern you to see how many thoughts you have as you sit. You may even start believing you're not cut out for a

Sesshin Dates for 2021

- March 19–22
- June 18–21
- September 3–6
- December 28–31

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*We use thought
to ... stir the
thought-*

practice like this because your mind isn't quiet. This is par for the course. When we sit still and begin to apply ourselves to practicing presence, we have the opportunity to see what our thoughts are up to you—and they may, in fact, get busier for a time because the thinking mind, being largely self-centered, doesn't like this new development, in which we are paying attention to things other than itself.

*sensation brew
that becomes
emotion.*

We think for all sorts of reasons: because we have grievances and fears and appetites; because we live busy lives, with responsibilities, tasks to do, things to remember; but also because we're addicted to thinking and have convinced ourselves that what we would face and feel were we to stop for a moment would terrify us half to death. We use thought to create an identity for ourselves; to divide the world into me and not me, mine and not mine; to assemble problems and fantasies, plans and obsessions; and to stir the thought-sensation brew that becomes emotion.

Not all thoughts are self-centered, of course. We have altruistic thoughts; we have creative thoughts; we have what we call "technical thoughts," just the facts: how to get from A to B, how to make a vegetable soup, what the scientific steps are for making a vaccine.

Regardless, in practice, we learn a new way of relating to our thoughts, discovering that it is possible to see thought arising and allow it to disappear without grabbing hold of it.

Having thoughts is not a problem. The problem, for us as humans, begins when we get tangled in thoughts or resist them, creating tension and separation. Both resistance and entanglement can be blinding.

But spontaneous thoughts, in themselves, are beyond our control. We are not responsible for their content. They *are* often influenced by what we focus

on in life; that's surely apparent to us. Still, thoughts simply arise. It is perhaps as natural for the mind to generate thought as it is for the nose to smell. Shohaku Okumura, who was ordained by Uchiyama, puts it this way: "When we let . . . thoughts come and go freely, we are not thinking; those thoughts are just happening, the same as our heart continues to beat and circulate blood throughout the body."

As we sit in open awareness, he says, "even though our brain is still working to produce all different kinds of thoughts and emotions, we do not take any action based on them." By "action," here, Okumura means building them into stories, fueling them with reactivity, jumping to conclusions, and so on. "When we sit with the attitude that these are not 'my' thoughts," he says, "then all different kinds of thoughts happening are merely the scenery of our lives."

It sounds simple. It *is* simple. And yet, to get there takes a lot of practice. Even when we see this more clearly, we are not going to do it perfectly. And in case there is confusion, the message is not that we should let thoughts ramble. Not at all. The ability to see them and let them pass without interference is a skill that comes with a maturing practice steeped in body awareness, focus, and steady presence.

As much as we need to, we label. Labeling helps us stay awake to our thoughts; it trains us to see them more objectively; and it gives us a stepping-off point for opening to sensory experience. We label individual thoughts precisely: Having a thought, "She doesn't like me." Having a thought, "I'll never measure up." Then, as habitual thought tendencies become familiar, applying category labels is helpful: planning; conversing; seeking validation; judging (never using labels to judge, but noticing judgment and labeling it, too).

Let's always remember that labeling is never more than Step 1. Step 2, essential to practice, is

opening to direct experiencing of life right now, just as it is.

Zen Flesh, Zen Bones opens with a very short story, "A Cup of Tea." In this story, a university professor goes to Japanese master Nan-in to ask about zen. Nan-in serves tea. He fills his visitor's cup to the brim—and keeps pouring. The professor watches quietly for as long as he can, but soon he cannot contain himself: "The cup is full!" he cries. "No more will go in!" Nan-in says, "Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions. How can I show you zen if you don't first empty your cup?"

When our cup is filled to overflowing with fixed beliefs, strong opinions, ideas about who we are and who we are not, this mind cloud obscures reality. Preconceived notions distort our vision, creating a barrier to direct experience. But if we learn to rest in the spacious intimacy of not knowing, then we find that we are genuinely interested in life, that we taste our food and are present to what others are saying, that it becomes possible to see what's asked of us and where we might contribute. As one teacher put it, "We become a vessel of learning, of receptivity, of listening."

—Kate Watson-Forbess

References

Reps, P. (Compiler.) 1958. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Charles E. Tuttle Co.

Okumura, S. Just sitting. *Lion's Roar*, January 2021.

The Story of Me wants to co-opt any experience; it is not a story with a happy ending.