

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

March-April 2021



Lightening Up

I recently heard a Zen teacher of some renown speak of the possibility of utilizing the *functionality* of the ego, instead of being lost in its demands for self-identification. In other words, to *use* it instead of *being used* by it. Interesting. I wonder if this might naturally happen, to some degree at least, as we wake up to the ego's pitfalls. For instance, we might respond if someone calls our name, without activating and acting out of a self-image. We would go ahead in response instead of reaction.

But aren't we so wired to miss how we're being dominated? There probably wouldn't be much need for "spiritual practice" if that weren't the case. I am grateful for the possibility of discovering that there is more to us than our believed-in dramas? Grateful to have this opportunity to practice. Even, for this adversity?

Let's try an exercise. You could do this anytime it comes to mind, or the mood

Sesshin Dates for 2021

- June 18–21
- September 3–6
- December 28–31

Please check [the website](#) for more details.

The ZCSD Board of Trustees reaffirms the Zen Center of San Diego as a safe space. In 2020, we formulated a policy in teacher / practice leader ethics and a procedure for reporting sexual misconduct. These policies will soon be on the ZCSD website. We strongly encourage you to bring any complaint you have to an officer of

strikes. The first part of a sitting period might work well, or the last part for that matter. Done regularly, what it entails can occur more naturally. Let's call it the "*Just Curious*" exercise. You might time yourself, 5-10 minutes to start. It doesn't need to be formal sitting—almost any scenario could work. You're going to just watch the mind, and be curious about what's happening. Having an intent just to be curious might be helpful. If you find yourself doing anything else, just notice that and return to watching. If you see yourself getting attached to something the mind presents, notice that and just let it settle with some applied awareness—if you're more settled you can sit in neutrality and watch the mind with a simple attention and curiosity. As thoughts come and go, notice any tendency to label as bad or good. We're simply watching, not engaging any thought. Not judging—just being present, open, and curious. And, probably, lighter.

This can be expanded. Emotions usually come with thoughts. Feelings appear. Sensations in the body. All can be just experienced. Witnessed. Felt.

Can we appreciate that we can do this - relate *to* thoughts instead of *from* them? This mind/body, really, *is* fascinating. You might find that more curiosity can lighten things up a bit.

At the Center, a few months ago, we did an exercise that entailed an awareness of use of personal pronouns in our speech (like me, my, mine, and I) and how we might be using speech to maintain or increase self-identification. Consider these three short statements:

I'm depressed. I'm lonely. I'm angry.

We might ask: "Is that really me? Or believed thoughts?"

the Board so that an inquiry can be made.

We would like to express our deep appreciation to everyone who has made a donation to ZCSD in the past year. We know that it has been a tough year for all of us, and we are very grateful for your support.

Practicing gratitude has been discussed by quite a few of our members this year. They reflect, sometimes on a daily basis, on things, large and seemingly small, they are grateful for in their lives. Many of us experience gratitude for the Zen Center of San Diego. The practice and teaching at ZCSD have touched many people in different ways. Perhaps we participate regularly in the Zoom program. Perhaps ZCSD played an important part in our life at some earlier point on our path. Perhaps our experience of ZCSD is only through its newsletter.

We ask that you consider expressing your appreciation for ZCSD by making a

I don't mean to make light of these challenges—they can be heavy. It can be helpful to see how our language may make things more difficult.

With a bit more "room" around the identifying tendency we might state: I'm feeling depressed. I'm feeling lonely. I'm feeling angry. But these still have the "I" at the center of them.

With still more spaciousness, or awareness, around the thoughts it might be: There are thoughts, emotions, feelings and sensations (in this body) that are related to depression, loneliness, anger.

And further, we might drop the label of the specific disease and just be with the thoughts, emotions, etc, that are present (maybe now just arising and falling, more free to change, lighter). We might even get to: not good, not bad, here it is, it's OK. Here we're more able to just experience. Perhaps, even, be curious.

My aim with this is to, of course, approach a more objective, neutral experiencing, instead of being taken by, or lost in, our story of "me," and suffering. When we believe in and identify ourselves as these things without any space of a larger awareness around them, we'll suffer, our life might be quite heavy.

I came across this statement a couple of months ago. It was in the context of spiritual practice: "This very clear matter becomes unclear with self-addition." It really struck me. What matter is it that might clarify without our addiction to this believed-self? A lot of matters, it occurred to me, maybe even the Truth of our life.

Most of us are probably familiar with the phrase, "The pearl of great price." But what

donation this year. You can donate through PayPal online by clicking on the yellow "Donations" link on our [home page](#). Or you can send a check to 2047 Felspar Street, San Diego, CA 92109-3551. Donations to the Zen Center as a non-profit organization may be tax deductible.

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You're going to just watch the mind, and be curious about what's happening.

does it mean? We might reflect on that for a moment. I would say it speaks to facing the challenge of seeing through that self-addiction and finding a freedom on the other side. It's about what we have to let go of to live fully. And our resistance to letting that go.

Remember Auden: "We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread, than climb the cross of the moment and watch our illusions die." Same thing, isn't it?

We might appreciate this challenge that we face. Seeing through self-addiction is pretty radical for we human beings. Zen practice is on the one hand radical and, as Joko, founding teacher of ZCSD would say, ordinary.

We face difficulties, long and short term, in this practice and in this world—more so now than any time I remember. Looking at my own experience and what I gather from some of you, practice isn't really getting any easier. With climate change, by itself, things may well get more challenging. And here we are more than a year in semi-isolation. There is so much going on, so many of us in this human collective, all inter-connected, connected to the planet, it makes a certain sense to me that practice may be more difficult. Sometimes we can get to feeling, "What's the use?" But this is a thought, isn't it? Would you trade doing the practice for not doing it? A lot of us have tried that at one time or another, maybe more than once. It doesn't seem to work. So I would encourage perseverance and a concern for maintaining a genuine practice.

I woke up a few days ago questioning the precision (or I might say authenticity) and commitment of my practice. The words and feeling of "go deeper" were there with me.

There was a kind of verbiage in the mind, non-judgmental actually, that went something like, "I'm staying on the surface of practice, with many believed thoughts about practice. Not surprising actually, for one quite prone to thinking. The ego's preference. It can seem like an easier way out, just running the conditioning. That's understandable. But let's look at going deeper." So I proceeded to sit for an hour (that felt like 15 minutes) and got up with a presence and stillness that usually accompanies the end of a Sesshin. I found it encouraging to experience how effective sitting can be when we really do it.

The take-away for me, what I'd like to be more aware of going forward, is this tendency toward "routine," or even a bit "lazy" practice and how it might manifest as thinking the practice as much as really doing it. This is probably more important in a world that may test us more and more.

It encourages perseverance to experience a larger awareness, the heartmind, and a stillness, that lightens us and opens us up. We can do this. We have the opportunity. The better we understand our tendencies, the ups and downs (and see them more objectively as up-downs?) the more negotiable they might be. And maybe better we'll know the answer to "What's the use?"

Thank you

—Chuck Sweet

There is only one place that practice is possible: here, in exactly what you are experiencing right now.