

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

September-October 2021



Welcoming Whatever Comes (and Goes)

Life—and death—are continuously presenting us with a kaleidoscope of experience. Some of it we like, some of it we feel neutral about, and some of it we find difficult or almost intolerable.

We get in trouble when we insist on prolonging what we like and refusing what we don't like. We also get in trouble when we lose any sense of proportion, turning trifling inconveniences into disasters. It's really best not to do that, and yet we do, which makes these upsets the stuff of practice. The little mishaps and dislikes and all the ways we fuss about them are training opportunities—unless we dodge them, as we often prefer to do.

We become skilled at “adjusting the controls”—picking and choosing to stay in our comfort zone. And the more we do this, the more we fool ourselves. But sooner or later, the bigger knocks in life come along, and we discover we are not in control. We also start seeing that this patchwork self we struggle to maintain is not something constant or reliable—and once we suspect

December Sesshin

Enrollment for the December 28-31 online sesshin opens November 24. You can apply [here](#) if you would like to participate (full time or part time).

The ZCSD Board of Trustees reaffirms the Zen Center of San Diego as a safe space. Our Code of Ethical Conduct for Teachers/Practice Leaders, Sexual Misconduct Complaint Procedure, and Commitment to Transparency and Communication are posted [here](#). We strongly encourage you to bring any complaint you have to an officer of the Board

that it can't be the essence of who we are, then our practice can deepen. We can begin welcoming our life in its infinite variations. Joko called this "choiceless welcoming."

So what is this "welcoming," and what is it not?

As a practice, it encompasses both the circumstances of life as we encounter them and our reactions to them. What it's not is inaction or apathy—unless those arise as reactions to be noticed and experienced.

When circumstances and reactions are painful or uncomfortable, we sometimes refer to them, in practice, as first and second arrows. The metaphor dates back to the early days of Buddhism. Life may shoot us unexpectedly with a first arrow—illness, loss, criticism, an accident. This thing that we don't want to happen is happening; we have no choice. But the second arrow is one that we shoot ourselves with: "I don't want this. Why does this have to happen to me? It isn't fair." Goodness, we even shoot ourselves with second arrows when life "goes well" for us! "I don't deserve it. I'm not worthy."

It's in the realm of the second arrow that we find the choice within choiceless welcoming. The initial upwelling of anger or fear; the sudden, frozen refusal; the first impulse to escape into thinking—those will often be too quick for us. But from there—and this is our bread-and-butter practice—we can learn to refrain from fueling the flames and can choose instead to let the uncomfortable sensations breathe and be experienced and move on through or melt away. Making *that* choice—not to persist in the reaction—can then allow us to respond skillfully to the events at hand.

In the everyday ups and downs of our emotional life, reactions become more evanescent as practice matures. This prevents a lot of suffering and is in line with

so that an inquiry can be made.

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the natural order of things. "This being human is a guesthouse," Rumi tells us. He doesn't say "long-term lodging"!

Rumi exhorts us to meet our reactions with laughter. That's *his* style. Our practice can benefit from a little lightheartedness, but your style may be different from Rumi's. Mine is quieter, for the most part, though I certainly chuckle sometimes at the brazen shamelessness of the little mind in its determined attempts to hijack the moment.

Levity aside though, when there's a traumatic event in someone's life, emotion can get stuck for a long time. That's a particular level of difficulty. And it's heartening for all of us to know that, even years later, with the right kind of help, emotion that is stuck this way can still be released.

Whatever our circumstances, it stands us in good stead to remember the basics of practice: noticing; experiencing. Noticing is necessary; otherwise, as we all know, thoughts seize our attention and we're soon preoccupied with the mental world. Thinking runs the show, and we fall out of touch with sensory awareness.

Noticing thoughts allows us to let them be and not engage with them. "That blower is really noisy!" And now experiencing the body as it encounters noisy blower. This is welcoming what comes. And then, a few minutes later, relief as the noise stops and the body breathes more easily.

Noticing; experiencing. Not, "I am having this experience of listening to the blower." Just being the body-blower experience that is our life in that moment. This is our practice.

Even when it's hard, if we can, we stay. There's encouragement to do this. An old Zen saying goes like this:

Ride your horse along the edge of the sword.

Hide yourself in the middle of the flames.

Blossoms of the fruit tree will bloom in the fire.

The sun rises in the evening.

We can hear this as a promise—and use it to set up expectations for practice. Or we can hear it as encouragement to stay with our experience, however uncomfortable it seems. The more we stay, the more we see through assumptions we make about who we are and what our life is. And if we can't stay? If it really seems too difficult? Maybe we dip a toe in the water, and that's as far as we go right now. That's our tolerance level.

So we do that, and then we back off. In daily life, this could mean taking a walk or eating an ice cream. On the cushion, it could mean focusing on a simple body awareness practice: bringing attention to the hands resting in the lap; experiencing breath in the belly; perhaps extending the outbreath for a while.

Whatever it was that scared us will come up again. Next time, maybe the toe stays in the water longer or the whole foot goes in.

We speak at times of the art of practice; it's an art we learn by not bolting, by learning to welcome whatever comes.

—Kate Watson-Forbess

"Joy is being willing for things to be as they are."— *Charlotte Joko Beck*