

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

January-February 2022



Caught in the Self-Centered Dream

"Caught in the self-centered dream, only suffering" is the first line of our Practice Principles. What is the "self-centered dream"? We usually think of self-centered as caring about oneself more than others, instead of others, at the expense of others. We are all familiar with experiencing this kind of self-centeredness. There is another sense of "self-centered" that is important to explore, the very notion that there is a self.

We humans are organisms that have difficulty with a universe that continuously arises anew, so we invent artificial frameworks that project a stable world with an even more stable "me" at its center. We can think of this partly in evolutionary terms. Evolution can bring advantages to a species, but also costs. For example, the shift to bipedalism, walking on the hind legs, helped our remote ancestors survive better in a savanna environment; however, it came at the price of a narrow pelvis that made giving birth, reproduction itself, both painful and dangerous.

So, too, with our consciousness. Our

Sesshin Dates for 2022

March 18–21, 2022

June 17–20, 2022

September 16–19, 2022

December 28–31, 2022

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*We are grateful to these
members for serving.*

*We also extend our
thanks to these 2021
board members who are
now stepping down:*

*Fred Conway, Jennifer
Kugel, Joyce Lane, and
Laura Urquhart.*

February All-Day

awareness comes with our ability to think, and for the last 100,000 years or so, to think with language. This has given us enormous advantages as a species. The main cost relevant here is that part—but happily not all—of our awareness is structured in a way that disguises the actuality around us. Much of our awareness is embedded in a “self-centered dream” that, to a good extent, is shaped by words. Language arose as part of the development of extremely complex social relations within our species. So, the “survival” that we worry about is not just threats from predators, but our position in the many social groups we interact with. The imagined self is attuned to even the most subtle signs from our fellow humans.

This capacity surely evolved in the context of threats to the survival of the organism. It somehow created a “me” to be defended. Our consciousness imagines, it creates, a world with a center and a self to be at the center. This part of our consciousness seems to imagine that it cannot survive in an ever-changing universe with no center. The imagined self must be defended. It exists in order to be defended. And so, of course, much of our energy goes into that defense. It is our imagined life project. We are driven to be ever-vigilant about this. Really, truly, vigilant. I sometimes find myself defending myself in imagined events that didn’t occur 20 years ago or might not actually occur next week.

But since we really do live in an ever-changing universe, sticking to this self-centered dream obscures the world instead of revealing it. Just as our reading, *Relying on Heartmind* (excerpts from the sutra of the third ancestor), says, “Holding onto thoughts denies reality.” This feature is a characteristic of our species. It is no more personal than walking on two feet. The brain

Sitting

There will be all-day sitting on February 12 and 13. The [Saturday Zoom link](#) will work for both days. There is no charge, but [donations to ZCSD](#) are welcome. This event will take place over Zoom, with the zendo open for a limited number of participants who are fully vaccinated and willing to wear a mask. Please contact Scott (619-301-6815) if you are interested in attending in person. The regular Saturday program continues as usual.

[Announcements](#)

[Sesshin Application](#)

*...being present
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keeps generating thoughts, sometimes more actively than others, but they keep coming.

One of the earlier revelations for many of us is that meditation is not about eliminating thoughts. Realizing that, no, it is not true that our teacher has no thoughts—that was one of my first moments of relief in Zen practice. The generation of thoughts in the brain is not a failure in meditation. It is a function of the brain. As we read in *Relying on Heartmind*: “Resisting thoughts perturbs the spirit! Why treat what’s yours as foreign?”

One of the marvelous features of our consciousness is that while it is mostly held in self-centered structures, it is not confined to those structures. We can not only be in our thoughts, but we can look upon them. We can, to use a metaphor, rise above the structures and see them from the outside. We can to a certain extent see the structures themselves. Even more importantly, we can see that they are structures. We can see the content of the thoughts, and we can feel the sensations associated with that content. We can practice with all that. This is a wonderful gift.

As we know, what matters is not the arising of these thoughts, but rather what we do with them. It is not the work of practice to get rid of the self-centered dream. It is rather to see it for what it is. And to see not only the structures, but the “caughtness,” the ways in which our awareness clings to them. The line is not, “The self-centered dream, only suffering,” but, “*Caught* in the self-centered dream, only suffering.” Our job is to experience what it is to be caught; mysteriously, this being present to ‘caughtness’ makes it more possible to experience the world as it is, beyond the dream we imagine.

The deeply radical image in the Zen story of the empty boat is helpful here. The monk, seeking calm in the middle of the lake, is meditating in a boat when he sees another boat coming toward him. He shouts at the other boat to steer clear so they wouldn't collide. But the boat smashes into his and he is very angry at the person steering the other boat—until he sees that the boat is empty. It's not personal. No self in the other boat. No self in that other person I'm so accustomed to being angry at. And then, of course, the completely unimaginable: No self in my boat either. From *Relying on Heartmind*, "The realm of true actuality harbors neither self nor other."

It's a relief to learn it's not personal. Mind wandered again while sitting? Not personal. Just welcome back. The wandering got noticed. Anything other than returning to being back is just getting caught again. Said something that was hurtful? Not personal. Reflection is good, self-flagellation is just getting caught again. So angry about the state of the country? Nothing personal. Energy going through. Feel that surge. Don't get caught again in the morass, so you can actually do something for the country.

The paradox, though, is that "not personal" does not mean no responsibility.

"No self" does not mean I'm off the hook. One could say that since, in an absolute sense, the world is perfect as it is, I am free to do whatever I want. But no dice. In our concluding verse of the *han*, we are enjoined to "not squander our life." To the contrary, "Each of us must aspire to awaken." That is, to experience life beyond the self-centered dream as each moment arises. Ultimately, perhaps, to realize that there is no self in either of the boats. Why does it so urgently matter, with time swiftly passing by and all?

Because we live in a relative world (even though it is also an absolute world).

My awakening matters to all of us, as does yours. It is important to be kind to each other and the world. There is no self at the center. There is indeed no center. From *Relying on Heartmind*, "No past, no future, [and most shockingly] no present." If there is no center, there can only be interconnectedness. Our responsibility to avoid self-centeredness in our relations with others can be seen in that context. It's not *my* life I'm squandering. It's *ours*.

-- Fred Conway

We have more possibilities available in each moment than we realize. -- *Thich Nhat Hanh*