

# Zen Center

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## O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

March-April 2022



## This Very Body

One of the sayings attributed to Jesus has stayed with me over the years: “The kingdom of heaven is within.”

We might use the word dimension (for kingdom) and spaciousness (for heaven)—so that the kingdom of heaven within us is suggested as the dimension of spaciousness. A dimension we can open to and experience, aided by our practice.

So there can be an intimacy between the body/mind and that dimension of spaciousness. An embodied practice might narrow the perceived gap between us and “heaven,” between a contracted, separate self and the opening to spaciousness, simply Being, presence, as this moment. Embodiment is being this presence.

Joko Beck, founding teacher of Zen Center San Diego, viewed awareness and experience of body sensations as the most important thing in our practice. Without it, she said, there can be no transformation in our life.

### 2022 Sesshin Dates

June 17–20, 2022

September 16–19, 2022

December 28–31, 2022

### Virus Safety

The zendo is now open to those who are fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19.

Please bring proof of vaccination with you.

For the time being, we are continuing to wear masks in the hall. We will post any changes to this policy on the [Zen Center San Diego](#)

website. Those who are not vaccinated are welcome to join us via Zoom; the links are on our site. Please stay home if you are experiencing any symptoms of the coronavirus (fever, sore

There is a grace in truly accepting what-is, in the moment when we breathe right into where we feel a strong sensation in our body, when we allow ourselves to just experience it, to feel it fully, to be non-separate from it.

What with the pandemic, increasing political divide, climate change, not to mention the symptoms of aging for many of us, not to mention the general uncertainty of life, most if not all of us are no strangers to anxiety.

I'd like to present a few practice guidelines that might help us negotiate better these times of change and uncertainty.

When we feel sensations of anxiety, perhaps as a tension or tightness in the body, and breathe into it, we are surrendering to the truth of the moment. We can take a slow deep breath in through the nose, let the sensations of breath flow through the anxiety, and then let the anxiety release with a long, slow outbreath through the mouth. Filling the body with air on the in-breath, releasing and relaxing on the out-breath, doing this for several breaths can make a difference in our level of upset. We give ourselves some space and some equanimity.

Could we have a partnership with the body? There may be some tendency, particularly as we get older, to come to see the body as something that has almost betrayed us. A giver of limitation and of pain. With aging and perhaps a chronic disease, some negativity toward the body might be hard to avoid, at least to some degree. And I guess we could say that aging is chronic. One of our toughest practices might be right here. But are we doing ourselves any favor seeing the body as an enemy? Are we ever helping a situation with our opposition, our resistance? Could we see our body more as

throat, coughing, runny nose, body aches, etc.).

See the [CDC Coronavirus Symptoms page](#) for a fuller list of symptoms.al.

[Announcements](#)

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*Breathing in,  
breathing out.  
Noticing.  
Experiencing. At  
rest. Alert.*

a member of the team, I wonder? As we persist in our opposition and resistance, are we not just increasing our suffering, and perhaps speeding up our debilitation?

Gaining some openness and space, some clarity of mind, staying out of catastrophic thinking, is key. We can notice those separating thoughts, breathe into what we are feeling, into the sensations. The phrase "not happening now" can be helpful.

Remembering and appreciating the good that is already present in our lives can be helpful as well, the people and things we love. Remembering what we *can* do instead of dwelling on what we can't.

I'm reminded of the phrase, "Get out of your head." It's been said we spend at least ninety-five percent of our time lost in thoughts, worries, judgments, planning, fantasizing, and the like. Getting out of the head and coming back to physical reality, like the simple awareness of the breath or our surroundings, diminishes the power of the story we tell ourselves and tend to believe, so that that story will less dictate how we feel and act.

Can we learn to pause? Probably especially important when we're caught in an emotional reaction like anger or fear. If we can pause, come to awareness of the sensations of the breath, for even just a few breaths, we might be able to step out of the mental melodrama and get a wider view.

Remember the importance of perseverance in our practice. It's recommended to sit, in zazen, everyday. Whether we feel like it or not.

And let's not forget our heart. In what ways could I offer kindness right now? To the world, to others, to myself? This can take us

out of our narrow, self-centered view and put us back in touch with our most authentic self.

Here's a simple heart meditation you might try. You might think of it as giving yourself, and others, some heart—what the world could use more of. If you read this while you do it, take it slowly.

Sit in an upright posture that encourages alertness but is not tense. Relax. Bring your attention to the heart area in your chest—it might help to put your hands over that area. Now, breathe into the heart space. The breath should be a bit slower and deeper than normal. Feel the sensations as the air passes through the mouth or nose and expands the chest in the heart area. Breathe out, again feeling the air contracting the chest and its passage through the mouth or nose. Do this for a few cycles of breath.

Notice any thoughts. I can sometimes feel thought-energy, a certain heat, in the head. With conscious breathing, might this be moved downward to meet the heart-energy in the center of the body (this can include the abdominal area and, a bit lower down, the hara)? Can those thoughts sink downward into the heart? Getting out of the head.

Breathing into that center, breathing out from it. Just watch any thoughts dispassionately. Let them settle out, bringing you to presence in the moment. An expansive, inclusive, alert silence can develop.

Stay with the breathing, into, out of, the body center. Experience sensations. Watch any thoughts—don't get hooked. Just return to the breath if you notice you've been distracted. We go back and forth—it doesn't have to be a problem. Don't judge yourself.

Breathing into the heart. Perhaps now more aware of the energetic silence, a silence that experiences sounds. Let thoughts come and go, as they will.

Breathing in, breathing out. Noticing.  
Experiencing. At rest. Alert.

There's another aspect of embodiment that is worth mentioning—to consciously bring the body more into our life. It entails such things as exercise, walking, running, hiking, sitting or just being in nature—really taking in all the life around you, chi gung, yoga, swimming, kayaking, and the like. You might see these all as forms of movement, and body and environmental awareness. Find which are best for you and the level, or intensity, that works best for you—all bodies differ. I feel relatively low intensities can be effective (more appropriate, probably, as we age, or according to our physical condition) —every body, or body/mind, is different, unique.

You might say that embodiment is a gateway to the spaciousness of Just Being, making us more available to this gift of life, and what it offers.

Years ago, at the Zen Center in Rochester New York, we used to recite Hakuin's Chant in Praise of Zazen. I'm reminded of the last verse: *What is there outside us, what is there we lack? Heaven (Nirvana) is openly shown to our eyes. This earth where we stand is the pure lotus land, and this very body, the body of Buddha.*  
Let's aspire to this realization.

—Chuck Sweet

