

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

July-August 2022



Just What Are We Doing?

For the folks who are relatively new to the Center or to the practice, I thought it might be useful to gear this writing to the specifics of sitting practice. We tend to say these things over and over, but even for the old-timers, like myself, periodic reminders are useful.

Just how are we spending our time in sitting? What are we doing?

Do we have hopes, expectations, that we wish to fulfill? Probably we do—overtly or more subtly.

And that's OK. We're going to do that. I had agendas for my practice for years. Nowadays, not so much—it's just to practice being present, open to what's happening in the moment. Sometimes, for me, there can be more subtle agendas that become apparent.

Maybe what's most important about hopes and expectations is to simply see that we have them. This zazen, as we call it, is about attention—noticing, experiencing, what is going on. Just simply that, nothing fancy, nothing clever.

2022 Sesshin Dates

September 16–19, 2022

December 28–31, 2022

September Sesshin

Applications for the September sesshin will be accepted from August 1. Participants may attend part-time or full-time. Please apply [here](#).

The Sexual Misconduct Complaint Procedure and Code of Ethical Conduct for Teachers/Practice Leaders

can be found on the [ZCSD website under "Policies."](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Sesshin Application](#)

So we watch our thoughts. Kind of step back a bit and say, to ourselves, "Oh, this is interesting. Having planning thoughts, self-conversations, fearful thoughts, judgmental thoughts. Curious. They come up, then settle down. Come up, settle down." We might notice a thought with an extra charge: "Oh, *that* thought kind of hooks me, keeps coming back."

The thoughts are, generally speaking, about forming and maintaining a personal identity. The ego is constant and insistent in this. That's its job—to get us to be and maintain us as a separate somebody doing something, a separate self. The more seriously we take this, the more we suffer—and we take it pretty seriously. And notice that this self we maintain is a mental self.

So we're just noticing. Without self-judgment. Not good, not bad. In so doing, we have the chance to experience that we are more than the thinking. We're getting space around the thinking. As Steven Levine used to put it, we're relating *to* the thinking instead of *from* it. Big, big difference.

This is key in our sitting and to our life. We're reminded of the first two lines of the Practice Principles we recite: Caught in the self-centered dream, only suffering. Holding to self-centered thoughts, exactly the dream. We're shedding the light of awareness on our dreaming. The key words here are Caught and Holding. If we notice the catch and the hold, it's not so bad. It's when we're lost in it, taken by it, blind to it, that we suffer—and probably cause others suffering too.

Thinking is a powerful tool we have as human beings. And, I would say, a tool we are literally wired to misuse. To, perhaps, our great detriment. But it doesn't have to be this way. As we develop awareness, and sitting is a great opportunity to do this, we can be less a slave to the pitfalls of this self-

Caught in thoughts? Just notice. Gently return to the body.

full mode of thinking. We're seeing better just how it works, and the consequences.

We get in our way. The spinning, the disconnection, the stress and anxiety of our selfing (believing in self-centered thoughts) block inspiration, block the flow of our life. Just relaxing is often a good first step.

Now to the physical aspect of the practice. Our posture should be *not uncomfortable*—one where we can maintain attention, without tension. These are not rigid rules, but rather suggestions:

The spine should be fairly straight without being rigid, the head just sort of floating on top of the spine, not too far forward. Shoulders back but not tight. Maybe let the shoulders drop a bit. This opens the chest so the natural breath is easier, not tense. The buttocks are preferably a bit higher than the knees. The knees are preferably resting on the mat, if you're sitting on a mat. This allows the lower spine to come forward a little, straightening the back and opening the chest some more. Let the hands rest comfortably in the lap, fingertips on one hand meeting those on the other, with the eyes looking forward, usually open, down about 45 degrees, with no particular focus.

The same guidelines if you're sitting on a chair, but obviously your knees aren't on the mat.

One is advised not to lean back too far into the back of the chair—the upper part of the body shouldn't be too far off the vertical. You can use a cushion between the upper back and the backrest of the chair to be more upright.

Tension in the posture can cause tension in the mind—the two are, of course, linked.

There is this physicality of practice. Embodiment. Emotions, feelings, sensations in the body. For example, we can experience, "Shoulders are tight. Ouch, pain

in the knees. Tightness in the lower back. It aches.”

We might notice a thought like, “I don’t think I can do this?” or “What am I doing here?” Can we notice that thought without buying into it?

This doesn’t mean we don’t tend to things that could damage us—we take action to avoid harm. But we might consider nudging our “edge” a little bit—as we call it, “lying on that icy couch.” This can be the place where there is movement.

“This feeling of sadness, or anger, I can feel it in my stomach area (i.e., a sensation there).” Can we experience that sensation? The quality of it, the intensity of it.

And then maybe we’ll notice thoughts about that, spinning a drama around it. Getting lost in it. If we notice we’re lost, we’re not so lost.

Experiencing the breath, the sensations of breathing, can bring us back to presence. This is always available to us as a sort of ground-zero. Just what are those sensations of the breathing? The quality, the texture—breathing in, the movement and sensation in the chest or solar plexus. Breathing out, the movement and sensation.

Can you feel more of the body? Maybe even head to toe. Reside in the sensations. Just this.

Just notice, experience. Keep coming back to the bodily experience, sensations, as you notice thoughts have taken you away from presence. Presence is simple, not complicated.

Don’t judge yourself for the back and forth. Have self-mercy. The back and forth, up and down, is just how it goes, for all of us.

Listening to sounds is another point of return. Sounds are always happening, available for our hearing. Can you hear that

crow, that mockingbird, the neighbors talking, that car driving by? Up close, or far away. Just listening.

Feeling the sensations of the breath. The sensations in the body.

Emotions? Feel the feelings in the body: location, texture, intensity. The breathing is always available.

Caught in thoughts? Just notice. Gently return to the body.

Stay with it, persevere. That's why we call it a practice.

We're strengthening our awareness muscle. Over time, just naturally more attentive, more just living our life.

Relax. Can you relax any tension, holding, you might find? Noticing can help with relaxing.

Just the breathing. Just the sounds. Just this moment.

The thought-filled mind tends to quiet as we stay with this practice. No guarantee, but it tends to. We're less taken by thoughts. Just here.

The important thing is to simply persist in noticing and experiencing. As long as there is noisy mind, notice noisy mind. And remember you have a body.

After a while, it might be possible to just drop any agenda, even the agenda to notice thoughts and experience body (what we are usually encouraged to do, and for good reason), and just let ourselves Be this moment. Let ourselves Be the sensations, the sounds, the vitality and energy.

Be this wonder of life.

—Chuck Sweet

“The best way to let go is to notice the thoughts as they come up and to acknowledge them.”

— Charlotte Joko Beck, [Everyday Zen: Love and Work](#)