

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

September-October 2022



Dropping Our Practice Agenda

Zen practice is difficult for us as human beings and yet very simple. As Joko said, it's nothing special. Useless zazen, Genmyo says. And in this, he echoes the teacher Kodo Sawaki, who said, "Zazen is good for nothing."

What do they mean? What is Genmyo saying with his "useless zazen"? And Sawaki, "Zazen is good for nothing." That's a translation, of course—Sawaki was Japanese, often called Homeless Kodo because he was an itinerant teacher.

Useless practice. Useless because there cannot be an agenda. If we are using zazen to get something, then that very wanting keeps us entangled in desire, hoping to improve ourselves, wanting our lives to be better. And when we're caught like that, we aren't present—we're off searching for something different. Moreover, what we're searching for is an image we have, an illusion.

2022 Sesshin Dates

December 28–31, 2022

2023 Sesshin Dates

March 10–13, 2023

June 8–12, 2023

September 8–11, 2023

December 28–31, 2023

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](#)

*"Zazen is good
for nothing."*

Zen teachings are full of contradictions, and zazen is not only useless, but—as Genmyo also emphasizes—most useful. Most necessary. Indeed, the quality of our life depends on it. If we don't learn to recognize our self-perpetuating drama as delusion, we inevitably live in the grip of its chaos—and do all kinds of mischief to ourselves and others. So: useless zazen, and yet most useful. Not really a contradiction.

What of those agendas? Of course, we do have them—they even drive our practice early on, when we first show up at a zendo, yearning for answers. On top of that, all the requirements we've put on our life since we were little, we bring to our sitting. And that's okay. Seeing those requirements, those agendas, becomes our practice. Needing to be a good girl, a good boy. Needing to break all the rules. Needing to be in charge. Seeing the judgments we have about ourselves and others. Experiencing the disappointment that arises when we don't feel the peace that we crave.

The teacher who translated Sawaki's expression, "Zazen is good for nothing," was Shohaku Okumura from Indiana. One summer, as a young man, Okumura was picking blueberries for a farmer in Massachusetts. There were dogberries growing in the field, too, and when workers picked indiscriminately, the farmer would shout, "Stop picking those good-for-nothing dogberries." Okumura was just learning English, so he was quite curious about this expression, and he thought carefully about the difference between those good-for-*nothing* berries and the blueberries.

He could see that they were both pretty, but only the blueberries were edible, and therefore had market value, so blueberries were "good for something." But, he thought,

take away human requirements and dogberries were good, too—just living their lives, being dogberries. So, they were good—but good for nothing. And years later, after translating Homeless Kodo, he said, “That’s why I translated [his] expression that way: ‘Zazen is good for nothing.’ [It] means zazen is good—but not for something. It is good in itself.”

Luckily, as far as we know, dogberries don’t worry about being good. They’re not feeling separate from the elements that nourish them or pining for the plant on which they’re growing. They’re not out to impress the farmer or the pickers. And they’re not jealous of the blueberries or judgmental of their fellow dogberries. They’re just living their lives.

That’s not to say plants don’t suffer—they wither and die, same as we do. But human beings make suffering complicated. Even when our lives are comfortable, we are often dissatisfied. We don’t get what we want, and when we do, it doesn’t last. Or it does last, but we have grown restless, and our craving has shifted from here to there. We even crave solutions to unreal problems—for example, by seeking approval to compensate for imaginary flaws.

Now we’re in the territory of the core belief: “I’m no good. I don’t matter. I’ll never be loved.” We might say this belief is the original second arrow, a self-inflicted wound. It’s a powerful lie that, if believed, if grabbed onto and acted on, blinds us to reality and sucks the joy out of life.

“I’m worthless! So, I’ll make sure no one sees that. I’ll appear calm; I’ll look good. No one will ever know the ‘real’ me. The me that’s messed up. Hopeless. Not good enough.” That’s the tragedy of this—we exhaust ourselves covering up something

that isn't true. Hiding a lie that we think is our real self.

Does that mean we're never a mess? Or that we're always good at everything we do? No, of course not. We *are* a mess sometimes, at least by conventional standards. And there *are* things we don't do well—maybe not well enough for our employer. It's okay. We get training, or the task is reassigned. That's part of life. But the core belief wants to define us by the negative assessment we've made of ourselves, which feeds our reactivity.

In zen practice, we discover how poisonous a core belief can be with its false narrative of separative suffering. But practice also gives us a way to be free—and though we forget, and get caught, that freedom still offers itself, moment by moment.

Once we're aware of our core belief and recognize its dynamic, the practice is seeing it for the mirage that it is, allowing the mirage to disappear, and resting on the icy couch that sits right behind that, right below it. Put another way, the practice is experiencing the pain that the core belief was trying so hard to explain. When we can do this, and there is just quiet sitting with whatever is there, then the present moment takes care of it. It's okay. But the *prospect* of doing this can feel very frightening, even impossible. As we guard against it, we might seize up, encountering barriers of dread and panic. If that happens, we can take heart from Joko's words: "At first, you just do it for a little bit. ... Finally, we can sit in dignity in the middle of that. Just sit there and let the pain and the misery be. ... When unreality (the core) meets reality, which is experiencing, then slowly the unreality ... fades away."

Useless zazen, and yet, most useful—good

in itself. When we see that our ways of defending against the pain of the core belief involve seeking approval, looking for the love that we feel is missing, trying to improve or perform or please or show up in just the right ways, when we really see that these are escape routes, then hopefully it also becomes clear that our practice is *not* about self-improvement. Yes, we have countless opportunities each day to turn the dharma wheel and live beneficially, potentially improving our lives and the lives of others. Let's not confuse the two.

We just need to recognize when efforts to fix or polish ourselves in practice are more of the same patterns and reflexes we've come to rely on as ways of covering pain and tailoring ourselves to fit a model of being that we find acceptable. Because this will simply perpetuate our pain. By contrast, dropping the hostile narrative of the core belief and resting on the icy couch is an act of compassion. We discover that it frees us to appreciate our life, to wake up to what's in front of us, and, as needed, to respond appropriately.

— *Kate Myoku Forbess*

References

Shohaku Okumura's account of picking dogberries and how it influenced his later translation of Homeless Kodo is based on Joel Agee's interview with Okumura in the Winter 2014 issue of *Tricycle*.

The core belief quote from Joko comes from *Ordinary Wonder: Zen Life & Practice* by Charlotte Joko Beck, edited by Brenda Beck Hess (Shambala 2021).

Life is a very simple matter. We're just doing what we're doing. —*Charlotte Joko Beck*

