

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

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The Delusion of Complaint

If you do not see the way, you do not see it even as you walk on it.

When you walk the way, it is not near, it is not far.

If you are deluded, you are mountains and rivers away from it.

I respectfully say to those who wish to be awakened,

Do not waste your time by night or day.

— "Identity of Relative and Absolute," Sekito Kisen

As we know, so often what blinds us is our human tendency to complain: *I can't believe she didn't talk to me. Couldn't she be more friendly? I don't like what you're doing. Why can't we do it my way? It's too cold in here. It's too hot. This food is awful. Can you believe these people? Why do they complain so much?*

It's been said many times: We get good at

2023 Sesshin Dates

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

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"Policies."](#)

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[Sesshin Application](#)

what we practice... And just as we practice awareness and presence with the help of techniques like thought labeling and “stop and pop,” so, in the absence of reminders like these, we can, through force of habit, continue to repeat—semiconsciously or in blind sleep—the mechanical behaviors of grumbling, dolefully wishing, or righteously insisting, *If only, it mustn't, how dare they, why can't you ... ?*

We can even be polite about it. But in practice, we cop to our well-mannered whining, too. It's all separating behavior that springs from judgment, from wanting things to be different and being tightly attached to outcomes. Not so different from the child who sets his face and decides, “If it can't be my way, I'm not going to play.”

How easy, if we indulge that first complaint of the morning, to follow it with another, and another. Quickly, the body tenses, and we are at odds with the world, missing precious minutes of our life and likely jangling the nerves of those around us. So, there is suffering. And because we suffer—and cause suffering for others—there is practice, both on the cushion and in our daily activities.

We suffer, not because these thoughts arise, but because they become so amplified, so disproportionately important to us. We think they are more real than the wall in front of us—and we chase them, judge them, resist them, cling to them. And in such conditions, they breed successfully. They breed within the struggle of the self-centered dream. The unity of heart-mind, our true nature, is always there, but caught in this separative activity, we lose touch with it, and we suffer.

Does practice say there should be no preferences? No. Nor does it say we should squelch our complaints; then they fester. The practice is to notice complaining

"By fleeing into complaint, we generate 'static' and choose confusion over the lived experience of our life."

thoughts as they appear and to let them pass without busying ourselves with them or dumping them into the world. We simply notice the thoughts and experience the tightness forming in the body, giving the constriction room to breathe and allowing it to soften and release.

We can even learn to notice the very beginning of the impulse to complain, the nub of it, and start practicing sooner. We can learn to “yield back.” And when the heat of emotion is past, if something is left to say, we say it more skillfully—often there may be no need for comment. (Being less attached to outcomes is not to be confused with making mindful efforts to bring about change. Clearly seeing what helpful action is ours to take in a situation, and when to refrain, is an integral part of our practice.)

While complaining can easily become a habit, more fundamentally it is a strategy of avoidance. Life-as-it-is continuously buffets and disrupts self-centered ideas that we want (and often take) to be real. And sometimes that buffeting is scary; it is unwanted and uncomfortable. There are places we’ve avoided a long time (defenses are dug in deep) and getting close to them is frightening. By fleeing into complaint, we generate “static” and choose confusion over the lived experience of our life, the buffeting of no-self, the ebb and flow of ongoing change. Kosho Uchiyama, in a commentary on a text by Dogen Zenji, says, “We suffer from what we do not need to suffer from, and we do not suffer from what we must suffer from.”

It’s the nature of thoughts to arise and pass, but as human beings we like to interfere with that. Through the practice of over and over again seeing our entanglements, letting thought go, and allowing tension in the body to uncurl and release *from its source*, a

settling occurs. And gradually, in a practice life, we are more able to see—and be—our nature, as it is, without reacting. Thoughts continue to appear, but we allow them to pass more easily. When difficulties arise, we remember more quickly to meet them as opportunities. And as practice nudges us toward an experience we would rather avoid, we have compassion for our fearful clinging and know how to let go.

CHECK-IN

- Reflect on the last 24–48 hours. Were there people, circumstances, difficulties that you didn't like? Did you complain about them, either internally or externally? Or were you able to notice the dislike and refrain from running with the complaint?
- Reflect on your general tendencies, knowing yourself as much as you do. Are there individuals, situations, quirks that you habitually complain about? Do you have pet peeves, long-held grievances, places where the ruts in the road are worn deep?
- What happens physically and emotionally when you indulge the complaining mind?
- What practices help you temper the impulse to complain?

PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS

- First thought, last thought: Begin and end the day with gratitude: "Thanks for everything. I have no complaints whatsoever." Do this same practice as you light a candle to sit and again as you close your home altar, and then begin to notice other opportunities to include it during the day. Over time, if your experience is like mine, the words will begin to pop up on their own, in quiet times and as difficulties arise,

when they can save you from diving headlong into misery.

- Ongoing awareness practice: Maintain awareness of body, breath, and environment. Notice thoughts as they arise, and if you get caught in them, refrain from pursuing them further and return to sensory experience. Practice presence in each of your daily activities.
- Wake-up practices: “Just this!” Or its cousin, “This is it.”
- Gratitude as a sensory practice (see below).

Sensory Gratitude Practice

- Instead of, “This food is great” (and diving headlong into your phone or a book), tasting your food, bite by bite, and perhaps reflecting on all those who helped to provide this meal for you.
- Instead of, “Wow, beautiful sunset—let me grab a quick photo,” being there in the evening air, feet on the earth, ears hearing the hum of the city ... the crickets ... a breeze in a nearby palm, skin and eyes responding to the changing light, your whole being opening to this unique, unfolding mystery of the universe.
- Instead of, “I should be more grateful,” refraining from indulging the complaint, returning to presence, and little by little allowing practice to settle the grumbling mind.

—Kate Myoku Forbess

References

The quote from Kosho Uchiyama comes from *The Wholehearted Way: A Translation of Eihei Dogen’s Bendowa, With Commentary by Kosho Uchiyama*

Roshi (Tuttle Publishing 1997).

The practice of “Thanks for everything. I have no complaints whatsoever” is described in *Ordinary Wonder: Zen Life & Practice* (p. 136) by Charlotte Joko Beck, edited by Brenda Beck Hess (Shambala 2021).

The progress of practice is to notice, more quickly, when we miss a step.
—Charlotte Joko Beck