

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

July-August 2023



Continuous Awareness

I've said before that sitting is a rendezvous with reality. The reality of life as it is. The thing is that most of the time, if we're honest, there's a filter there that clouds our perception. This is the filter of our assumptions about life and our reactions to how things are—our opinions about people and circumstances, our resistance to letting them be, and our demands that they be otherwise.

Recently, I found it very refreshing to have someone who is still new to practice ask me, "So, is work a part of practice, too? I didn't know that." And again, a bit later, "I didn't realize that relationships were included in practice. That's new for me; that's interesting."

After a while, we come to see that everything is practice. That nothing less is asked of us than continuous practice, whether we are sitting on a cushion, planning a budget, or caring for a friend. But these candid comments from someone who hasn't been practicing long are a wonderful reminder that this isn't clear to most of us when we take up a commitment like this. It can't be clear, really, because we don't yet know what practice is. We can read about it, and books by

2023 Sesshin Dates

September 8-11
December 28-31

September Sesshin applications are now open. Please apply here.
<http://www.zencentersandiego.org/schedule/sesshin.php>.

The Sexual Misconduct Complaint Procedure and Code of Ethical Conduct for Teachers/Practice Leaders can be found on the ZCSD website under "Policies."
<http://www.zencentersandiego.org/Policies/>

good teachers may inspire and encourage us. But there is no substitute for our unique practice journey.

"After a while, we come to see that everything is practice."

Zen practice is not an elite undertaking. It's not reserved for the super-smart, or the super-strong, or the super-rich, or the super-healthy. But we have to start somewhere and learn the basics: how to sit still and pay attention; how to observe phenomena arising in the mind—and refrain from entangling with them; how to reside in sensory experience without trying to control it.

We can't even aspire to practice continuously throughout the day until we have some ability or skill in these areas, and in zen practice, we first develop this on the cushion. Then, as awareness increases, we begin to wake up every now and then in daily life, too. We discover that awareness is possible during activities, in motion, but still, for a long while, we are mostly asleep ... it's only very gradually that practice becomes more consistent throughout the day.

Once it does, even when there's struggle, there's awareness of the struggle; there's awareness that we are on edge or being selfish or at a loss as to how to cope. This awareness can be enough to prevent us from blurting unkind words or rushing into a poor decision; it can allow us to listen and be patient; it can also be a cue to ask the practice question, "What is skillful for me to do here?" That step can be helpful, whether we're grappling with interpersonal dynamics, a change in our health, or the wider suffering we see across the planet.

Practice won't give us a life without pain or loss, without hardship. It can help us to meet these experiences more openly and to live through them with grace, but life will manifest as it will, whether to us it is lovely, mystifying, cruel, or joyous. ... Through it all, practice can be our friend, but a readiness to practice won't always come easily, given how willful and grasping we are. Sometimes, we'll want to give up and declare that it's useless or impossible. We'll want to stomp our feet and yell no.

In those times, we'll do well to examine our expectations of practice. Is it supposed to give us a life with no difficulties? To spirit us away to

somewhere safe from harm? To make us perfect and unassailable?

Such demands can be very persistent across a practice life, and if we stay blind to them, we set ourselves up for frustration. But if we can see them, loosen our grip on them, and keep opening to sensory awareness, practice can give us the one true experience that is offered freely, in the one place where joy and peace are possible: it can give us our life in this moment, fleeting and wondrous and real. It can give us what's already here—who and what we are, interconnected, everchanging, boundless, and exactly enough.

—*Myoku*

Many Hands Making Light Work

On the last Saturday of July, we abbreviated our usual morning program and spent a few hours doing some much-needed maintenance on the zendo property. It was a lot of fun, and everyone did a great job. Thanks to all who participated!

"Practice is the act of placing our awareness on what is occurring in this moment as best as we can."

—*Joko Beck*