

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

March-April 2024



Carousels and Cravings

In the past few weeks, I've been donating some clothes and books, a few bags of bric-a-brac. I've noticed that the spirit in which I do this makes a difference. When I was younger and living in smaller spaces, it was all about "getting rid of stuff," or trying to get a monkey off my back. Then quickly I'd discover that—presumably in my sleep—I'd acquired just as much stuff all over again.

These days, I prefer to make this task a practice, *choosing* to pass each item along, rather than elbowing to get rid of things. I might inwardly thank a person I associate with a piece or briefly consider how it came into the house. There's more generosity in this approach, more room for gratitude.

But is there anything here that relates to our wider practice?

Early on in our sitting practice, it can be tempting to think

2024 Sesshin Dates

June 5-9
September 13-16
December 27-31

June sesshin enrollment will open May 1.
<https://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."

that if we can just see what's going on with us, we'll be able to get rid of it and be left with a nice, tidy, airy self. But our practice is not to get *rid* of aspects of ourselves. It's simply to observe and experience whatever shows up: sensation, emotion, thought, perception—and as much as possible, to refrain from entangling with it, even if it feels as though there's a monkey on our back. Of course, we *do* get entangled, and then that's what shows up.

As practice matures, it's true that entanglements generally don't last so long; there's more spaciousness. But we never graduate from practice. None of us knows what life will bring or how entrenched some fears and strategies might prove to be.

On the cushion, sitting in the everchanging dynamic of life, it's good practice to notice thought as it arises, to see it exist for a moment and pass into oblivion. But if there's emotional charge, isn't it the case that the same thought or one similar can show up again? This time the charge might be weaker, the contraction in the body a little milder, the temptation to become entangled less compelling. And so, as we practice, the lure of a particular thought or family of thoughts diminishes. But if we give in to thoughts and run with them, then we feed the emotional charge, and it gets stronger.

Imagine a carousel at the airport. You've come off a flight and are waiting for your luggage, watching the bags go round and round—there's that green one again with the funky strap holding it together. The practice of noticing thoughts can be like this sometimes. Okay, there's that thought again, seeing it. Round and round.

At the airport, let's say your own bag hasn't shown up yet, so you're still watching the cases and oversized backpacks circle on the carousel. We might call them habitual self-centered thoughts. They're not causing any trouble, and they won't—unless you start claiming them as yours and walking off with them and getting into their stuff. That will cause a lot of trouble, right! And now comes the bag that it *does* make sense for you to take home and make good use of. What about that one? Just for fun, and to keep the metaphor going, we could say that this is a life-centered moment, a moment of clarity showing the way forward.

Okay, so we were talking about clearing things out, but whether we live in a streamlined environment or are knee-high in clutter isn't the point. There's nothing essentially better or worse about either of these. We can decide that streamlined is the way to go and do a fabulous job of decluttering, but if we are not practicing with our wants and appetites, our aversions and attachments, then we will keep indulging the cravings

<http://www.zencentersandiego.org/Policies/>

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that overstuffed our wardrobe in the first place or crammed our bookcase full of books, many unread. Cravings don't dissolve overnight because we've tidied up. We may delight in the open space, but then it becomes an invitation to go on a shopping spree.

My point here is that if we're caught in clutter loops or we keep on acquiring things that we don't fully enjoy, it's the craving driving the acquisition that we need to practice with, because, unattended to, that craving will keep us in a cycle of suffering, whether our particular appetite is for food or clothing, relationship or adventure, approval or something else.

When craving shows up, the practice is to recognize it and be present to the sensations, which may be quite uncomfortable. The tug can be powerful. We might see that we're running from a fear or propping up a version of ourselves that we like to project. But whether this happens or not is secondary. The sensory experience of craving is our life in that moment.

No one is saying that we shouldn't go on adventures or enjoy tasty food. We're not striving to meet some strict standard of asceticism. But a life of practice reveals the nature of suffering. And when a behavior is engendering suffering, that becomes clear. Then our commitment (our vow) is to alleviate the suffering, rather than perpetuate it. And that, in turn, brings freedom to live a more functional life, whether for each of us this means raising children or writing a book or protecting wild spaces or assisting people who are homeless. We all have contributions to make; we all have gifts to offer. Thank you.

—Myoku

"The point of practice is exactly this clashing space in which my desires for my personal immortality, my own glorification, my own control of the universe, clash with what is." —Joko Beck