

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

May-June 2024



Relax As It Is

I thought I'd talk today about opening up to our difficult places. It could be our confusion, our anxiety, our anger, or grief, or sadness, or what comes to mind for you.

These are all things, of course, that we'll meet in being human. And all can present us with real discomfort.

I had an opportunity for practice "at the edge" this last Thursday, when I spent half the day in an emergency room on the UCSD Medical campus, with heart arrhythmia. Over four hours it was determined the best treatment would be what's called cardioversion—a shock through the chest that resets the normal heart rhythm. This is administered after sedation. It worked. It was nice to have a normally beating heart again.

It was also nice to experience the help given by many caring people there at emergency—doctors, nurses, technicians, assistants, everyone. I tend to take for granted the help that so many fellow human beings give to make life better, or to maintain life.

2024 Sesshin Dates

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

June sesshin enrollment closes May 28.

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

So we're saying something has happened that thrusts us into anxiety.

"What can I do about this?" we might ask. Of course, we can take intelligent action related to the source of the anxiety. For practitioners the question might be, "What is the practice with this anxiety?" In a way, we don't do anything with it. We have an opportunity to experience it.

What is there to just experiencing it? We've heard it before, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded. Can we open to it? Not push it away. Notice the thoughts we have about it, feel the feelings and emotions, notice and feel what is happening in the body (in this case, the irregular heartbeat).

For me, the practice entailed feeling the sensations, without the mind adding on a believed, "Oh, this is bad. I want it to stop." Or noticing when there was some of that added on.

Then we have the opportunity to notice that "I want," the notion of the "I" that wants things to be different than the way they are. That thought-created "me" that we put at the center of our world. Loaded down with all the things that catch us. And in our holding, we suffer.

Joko Beck, the Center's founder, would tell us that true experiencing happens when that "me" disappears, when we're fully present. Sometimes practice requires us to go deeper.

It's just characteristic of us, as humans, to turn away instead of turn toward that which gives discomfort. So we might tend to miss the opportunity that's offered. We'll change course and do something that removes us from our discomfort, if possible. As practitioners, hopefully, we're a bit more prone to the possibility of "leaning in."

Maybe the best opportunities come when we can't, or no longer can, turn away. This might actually be considered a grace given by life and practice where we can choose (or must choose) to just stay with the discomfort, to let ourselves get to know it a bit, and see how that "just staying" can be helpful, how it can lessen our suffering.

Again, practice can require us to go deeper. To experience how we want to run away, even as we can muster some staying power. We can experience as much of the whole thing as we can, the whole mixed bag of it. Developing even a little more willingness to stay is a good thing to go forward with in our life.

In a way, I see this as largely what our life is about.

The Bodhisattva's Vow tells us of how the "awakened life" (this life that we are) supports us in presenting opportunities that move us away from our "blind tendencies." Can we see staying as an opportunity to do this? In our reading by Rumi, "This Being Human Is a

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Guesthouse," he suggests that we treat each guest that shows up at our door honorably—even if they sweep our house clear of its furniture—as they may be clearing us out for some new delight. It may be a gift from this awakened life.

Pema Chodron has a good four-word phrase for what we're speaking of: "Relax as it is."

The first time that it occurs to us to relax can require a little faith and courage. Practicing over time can help develop some of this—we have evidence in our life of how just relaxing is often the better way to go. This, coupled with, perhaps, something of a gut feeling to not turn away, can propel us into staying with the discomfort. We don't have to be "really relaxed," just enough to stay a bit longer.

It's what might be expected, thinking and feeling that moving in will make matters worse. Over time I've had toothaches, body aches, heart arrhythmia, obsessive negative thoughts and feelings and the like, that took a little faith and courage to move toward. You might be no less uncomfortable initially. That's okay, the aspiration is to just experience, maybe more clearly see how turning away can increase suffering. So we stay a little while, make it a practice. See what happens.

Our sitting is about opening to and staying with the difficulty the best we can, with whatever arises. It's not about repressing or grasping anything. Can we lighten up, loosen up, have an honest encounter?

No need to struggle against our thoughts—we can watch, notice, or label them. Honesty and humor are more helpful than being for or against anything. Let's be reminded that we're not trying to get rid of thoughts, but rather to see their true nature. We likely know how thoughts can run us around in circles if we buy into them, but really they are like dream images, an illusion, not solid.

Again and again, we come back to being right where we are this moment—through boredom, anxiety, fear, or whatever.

An important point here is self-mercy. Tibetan Buddhism has the word Maitri, meaning unconditional friendliness. Applied to oneself it's self-compassion, and as realized it tends to extend outward into the world. A world where parents taught children self-compassion might be markedly different from what we currently have.

With practice we're clarifying who we are and what we do, seeing our patterns and our habits. When we do this with kindness, an unconditional friendship with ourselves, it's called Maitri.

To quote Pema Chodron: "What makes it such a different approach is that we are not trying to solve a problem. We are not striving to make pain go away or to become a better person. In fact, we are giving up control altogether and letting concepts and ideals fall apart."

She also speaks of a powerful ally that we have in our practice, that is with us all the time. There are two words in Tibetan that help to bring this forward—sem and rikpa.

Sem is small mind, an image that we have of ourselves and hold in our minds. Sem is what we experience as discursive thoughts, a stream of chatter that's always reinforcing an image of ourselves.

Rikpa literally means "intelligence" or "brightness." "Behind all the planning and worrying", she says, "behind all the wishing and wanting, picking and choosing, the unfabricated, wisdom mind of rikpa is always here. Whenever we stop talking to ourselves, rikpa is continually here."

Remembering this, experiencing this, can aid us in not turning away from opening to our difficult places.

—Chuck Sweet

"There is a darkness out of which everything comes, an endless creative potential that's pouring out of our life at every second." —Joko Beck
