

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

January-February 2025



Staying Awake Through Change

Life is endlessly changing. Everything that is born dies. Impermanence is a mark of existence. This is a fundamental teaching of our tradition, and one we can verify for ourselves. Across space and time, so many generations have faced—are facing—upheaval, devastation, great uncertainty. Change that comes in the form of fire or flood, violence or illness, can sweep away everything that has supported life, and this month, that scale of change unfolded in Los Angeles, for people just like you and me. In a groundswell of support, the community gathered round, helping to provide neighbors with

*[their] daily food, drink, clothes,
And protections of life
... the warm flesh and blood,
The merciful incarnation of the Awakened Life.*

But the way ahead is long, and our hearts go with them as they walk that road. How grateful we can be that today we have those protections of life, a warm bed to sleep in, on these cold nights. Recently, I read in the *New York Times* an article by Pico Iyer, whose home in Santa Barbara burned to a cinder in 1990 in a fire that almost killed him. As he rebuilt his life after that, he chose to live more simply. Iyer wrote,

2025 Board of Trustees

We are happy to announce the 2025 Board of Trustees:
Polly Carmona, president
Ed Harpin, vice president
Fred Conway, secretary
Ralph Nowacki, chief financial officer
Scott Forbess
Sincere thanks to you all for serving!

And deep gratitude to these outgoing board members:
Steve Powell
Vijay Raghavan
Giza Braun
Jaspreet Bhatia.

2025 Sesshin Dates

March 20-23, 2025
June 18-22, 2025
September 18-21, 2025
December 27-31, 2025

"The world's increasing threats mean that we have to learn to ground ourselves amid the constant reminders of impermanence.

"I truly hope my devastated friends around Los Angeles ... may discover what I have found: that our lives are determined less by what happens to us than by what we make of what happens to us."

Change that we like, we celebrate; change that we choose willingly, we embrace; and change that goes against our preferences in minor, everyday ways, we may chafe against, but not for long. Then there is another sphere and scope of change: change that rocks our core, offends our sense of what is just and right—this kind of change we may find horrifying, outrageous. In such a time, can we remember what Pico Iyer was saying?

From the absolute perspective, to paraphrase words Joko said to me once in daian, "We're changing a million times a second, so who is there to be outraged or horrified?" And yet ... reactive feelings arise, and when they do, practicing with them is important. Not so that we become sheep or so that we like what happens. But so we do not desert our commitment to live from wisdom and kindness; so we appreciate the wonder of this one life that each of us is living; so we show up in the world in helpful and effective ways.

When the tectonic plates of a society shift, one half grieves, the other celebrates. So, it is. Our practice teaches us—has taught us—to tolerate, even to embrace, uncertainty, discomfort, lack of control, and to function beneficially in the midst of them.

Difficult practice is an opportunity to meet the moment with our whole self. At times, this can seem like a heavy lift, so we need to look at what contributes to the weight. How much is resistance to what is happening? How much is anticipatory anguish, despair, for what may be lost? How much is fear? How much is distracted thinking looking for avenues of escape, fleeing down tunnels dug years ago in a season of hardship or emotional wounding? Habitual patterns of tension die hard, and current anxieties can rekindle old stories, stirring a familiar sense of vulnerability. What are the patterns *you* fall back on when what feels normal is disrupted?

If the churn of the anxious mind takes over, we know it generates suffering and can encourage escapist behaviors—zoning out, overeating, planning obsessively; or anxiety might flip into anger (suddenly we're snapping at people); or we become tightly wound, hypervigilant, distrustful ... none of them being joyous ways to live.

So, if we're reactive, if the mind is leaping ahead into dark places, it is a good time to intensify our practice—sit more, show up for each other, *notice* the desire to run away, and, as Hakuin said on one occasion (so I'm told), get a grip! Get a grip. Our life is here, now, and here—now, with whatever is happening, is where we wake up. I think of scenes from movies and television shows where a person is gravely wounded and someone is with them smacking their cheeks, urging them, "Stay awake, stay awake! Don't go to sleep. You mustn't go to sleep." Because if we go to sleep, we lose our life, right? We lose

February Zazenkai

ZCSD will offer a short-form zazenkai on February 15, from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm. This is a chance to sit a bit longer with the support of others. Please bring your own food. There is no charge, though donations are most welcome. <http://www.zencentersandiego.org/schedule/alldaySittings.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/>

*"Joy moves freely
through the universe,
doing its quiet
work."*

our life.

So yes, if grief arises, feel the grief; feel the fear or outrage. But can you feel it as wind and learn to fly; can you feel it as wave and learn to surf; can you feel it as wave and become water? Then, there is joy, and joy moves freely through the universe, doing its quiet work. Doing its quiet work—teaching children, caring for those who are sick, building houses, speaking up for cherished values and taking skillful action.

Some of us are elders of the community—our zen community, but also the community at large. In our decades of life, of practice, what have we learned? Can we stay the course when we want to run? How will we show up for those in distress and those who will live on beyond us? Can we discern what is ours to do, where we can make a difference—and where we can't?

Emily Dickinson gives us this couplet:

*In this short Life that only lasts an hour
How much - how little - is within our power*

And more recently, from another American poet, Jean Valentine (1934–2020), come these lines, part of a poem called "Sanctuary":

What do you dread, in this room, now?

*Not listening. Now. Not watching. Safe inside my own skin.
To die, not having listened. Not having asked ... To have scattered life.*

Yes, I know: the thread you have to keep finding, over again, to follow it back to life; I know. Impossible, sometimes.

Impossible, sometimes. But only impossible for a little while, until we do follow the thread back, and connection is restored. Our ears are open again. And a way forward becomes clear.

At the beginning of the month, we reflected on our Timeless Vows, the Heart's Vows, and on the actions that can support them in our lives. During sitting, we can continue to consider these, remembering—as we did in sesshin—that there is always available to us an intimacy with the source of life, an intimacy with our True Nature. We need only pay close attention.

Please, let's have a strong year of practice; let's support one another. This will make a difference in your life and in the lives of those around you. Thank you.

—Myoku

Impermanence is, in fact, just another name for perfection. Leaves fall; debris and garbage accumulate; out of the debris come flowers, greenery, things that we think are lovely.

—Joko Beck

