

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

March-April 2025



The Opportunity of Fear

Remember the phrase, “Feel the fear and do it anyway”? Maybe better said as, “Notice the fear, feel it, and use the energy of it to move ahead with full attention to the task.” We speak of warriors as being fearless. Probably not—but fear doesn’t overwhelm them.

Could we be compassionate warriors, who take action that is not disconnected from our hearts, who are aware of fear but not dominated by it?

Can we come to know the nature of fear, move toward it, get intimate with it? This can move us toward fearlessness. When fear is heightened, it’s an opportunity to get to know it better. If it remains in the dark, it will

2025 Sesshin Dates

June 18-22, 2025

September 18-21, 2025

December 27-31, 2025

Wednesday Programming for April

<https://www.zencentersandiego.org/>

haunt us. In moving toward it, we can make it an ally rather than an antagonist.

Persistent practice can take us in the direction of fearlessness, though we may have to be patient. We are encouraged over and over to enter our discomfort zone, stay for a while, and learn something about the nature of our suffering. We can find that not only do we survive but there is a bit less suffering in our life. This helps to develop trust, and that helps us persist.

What a limiter on life fear can be. What a challenge we can face in delving into our fear—particularly as it is designed to have us turn and run. This was an important part of our ancient development, surviving with predatory animals around, but thought-based fear, where our black expectations rarely come true, doesn't serve us.

Instead, it limits our vision and can keep us from acting in ways that could be helpful to ourselves and others. It can blind us to the suffering of others, and our own suffering, or the way out of suffering. It solidifies our belief in separation. Caught in fear, we misunderstand ourselves and others, we contract. We fight, we're violent. There's bloodshed and destruction.

There is much on the internet about what I would call "fear management." This can be a helpful companion to our practice, but I don't see this management as a substitute for practice. As an example, if fear-thoughts become almost obsessive, like a spinning eddy in a river, it can sometimes make sense to divert from the pattern by engaging in an enjoyable activity, exercising, taking a walk in nature, or listening to your favorite music. Then a return to practice can be more effective.

Here's a tendency I have that leads to fear: "I need things to make sense!!" "I need things to be in order!!" The absence of either of these means, to me, chaos is taking over, threatening my very existence. It feels existential. And what a setup for fear! How often do things make perfect sense? How often are they in complete order? Not to say there's anything wrong with sense and order.

Fear can thrive as we stubbornly hold onto our identity. In keeping this identity intact, we miss a lot of our life. Until we see through our fear, it will haunt us.

What if "our identity," "our existence," didn't really matter to us? What if we didn't believe egoic thoughts and

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concepts related to identity and existence? There could be more freedom.

This gets to the core of spiritual practice: freedom from self-concepts. It gets us to a deeper, more fundamental "I," to our Being, where we can lay down our concepts. We can realize that we are this Being, this consciousness. As Joko said, "We are this awareness."

Pema Chodron says, "Life is a good teacher and a good friend." Isn't it nice to have a good teacher and a good friend? That's there all the time?

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "We lie in the lap of immense intelligence." If we can consciously utilize even a small part of this, it can make a difference. Practice can develop faith and trust in the potential of freedom and impart a feeling, a seeing, of where our freedom lies: in surrender to the wonder that is our life.

With our powerful egos, we can be stubborn, persistent in our separative thoughts. Persistent in our suffering. It seems we would rather identify with our suffering than allow ourselves to wake up.

Probably the first step in our practice with this is simply to see what's going on. It's a first step, but a really important one. There's a world of difference between seeing and not seeing what we're up to, between being a slave to our thoughts and seeing how we are a slave. The tangle can begin to unravel as we apply the light of awareness. This is the practice, developing that muscle of awareness.

Here at the Center, we sometimes recite a reading by Pema Chodron called "Fear of Life." The last line of the reading is, "We think our biggest fear is fear of death, when actually it's fear of life." Fear can aid us in living life instead of fearing it, if we practice with it.

Let death take care of itself—it will be fine, if we take care of our life.

Practice is taking care of our life, allowing ourselves to live it with intelligence and compassion. Let's remember the basics of practice—watching thoughts, rather than believing them, experiencing the sensations of the body, cultivating awareness of inside and outside, developing a feel for *nothing really being outside*. It's the belief in separation that creates our suffering.

Some years ago, I was called to Michigan, where my father had only a few days to live. As soon as I entered

the front door of the house I grew up in, I was struck with the importance of just being as present as I could be—that was most important. It wasn't easy, there was emotion, but that presence really helped. I had a similar experience when my mother died a few years later: the value of presence, not turning away, experiencing whatever was coming up.

Similar, too, was my experience in the emergency room with heart arrhythmia about three months ago, when it occurred to me that I was seeing the arrhythmia as an antagonist, that I was turning away, that I was punishing myself for being afraid. It can take some fortitude to relax, allow, trust, and get close. We tend to think that such a response will make matters worse. But it didn't make matters worse; it helped. We can make what we don't want to face an ally. It may sound strange, but we can become willing to die—we can see that there is something more important, that the thing to do is move through the separation, through the fear, to where things can open up.

In the hospital, in conjunction with this practice of turning toward, I did hara breathing (the "hara" is the region about two inches below the navel), connecting with the sensations there—the breathing sensations and the sensations of the arrhythmia. Relaxing and surrendering. It was better, and I felt more alive.

It would be nice if two or three such experiences would turn the tide on fear but, for me at least, the challenge is ongoing. And that's okay. Some of our leanings can be stubborn, deep-rooted. So, it helps to remember that persistence is paramount in our practice, especially if we want to take fearlessness out into the world.

—*Chuck Sweet*

Anxiety is always a gap between the way things are and the way we think they ought to be.

—*Joko Beck*