

# Zen Center

---

O F S A N D I E G O

## **Sitting With Pain and a Noisy Mind**

### **Sesshin Talk**

**2/12/24**

Whether we're fairly new to sitting or a veteran, it can be useful to be reminded of how we might practice more effectively. We'll likely be confronted with tension, or pain, or with a busy mind in the course of Sesshin.

We have three phrases we use with some regularity that might be helpful here: Can I make what's happening now my path, my practice? What is it to practice with this situation? And thirdly the recognize, refrain, and return (R, R, and R) practice. The third can be an answer to the second. The first requires us to remember to practice and be willing to carry it out. These three work whether it's here at Sesshin or in our moment-to-moment life.

I'd also like to recommend the possibility of bringing in some curiosity, humor, and self-mercy. It's easy to get a bit heavy about our life and practice. These three can lighten things up and bring in some heart. Life's far from all-bad, there's much to be appreciated. The poet, singer, songwriter, and Zen practitioner Leonard Cohen, who sat many years and sometimes 12 hours a day at Mt. Baldy Zen Center in the San Gabriel mountains, not too far from LA., was quoted as saying, "The more I meditate, the less of me there is, and the happier I am."

Let's delve into pain first. I had a root canal a while back and the day after was pretty painful. I asked myself, what is the practice here and can I engage it, make it my path? Along with the pain, there could be some awareness and curiosity. There was the experience of how turning attention toward it with curiosity affected the pain, or the perception of pain.

I recognized that the strength of the pain was connected to a resistance, a holding back from just experiencing it. There was some fear that opening to it would be a loss of control or it might hurt more. Bringing in awareness can help us move from reactive fear to being more grounded in the actual physical experience. If I turn toward the pain, attending instead of thinking, what might I experience? How would I describe the pain? Where is it exactly? Can it move? Is it steady or throbbing? What is its texture? For instance, is it smooth (achy) or sharp (acute)? Is its intensity related to thinking?

I saw that refraining from the fear-based resistance and bringing in a wider body awareness could moderate the pain. But it's easy to be reactive to pain, it hurts. At one point, I recognized the resistance and pain were increased and that I was back into reactive thinking. Returning to the actual sensations in the present moment, again, helped to moderate the pain.

We often need to employ cycles of this recognize, refrain, and return. It can go up and down. Hopefully we'll persevere with the practice, and not be unkind to ourselves if we feel we've fallen short. We do the best we can. Pain can be a tough one, and I ended up taking an OTC pain reliever that evening, which allowed a restful, healing sleep that night.

So we want to listen to our body in our pain, and not do it damage. Sitting pain is a bit different than dental pain but similar too. They both involve intention, attention and sensation. If we don't turn away it might teach us something, but it can be prudent to take steps to lessen or relieve the pain. Again, let's not damage ourselves. Possibilities include shifting your posture (or sitting in a chair), taking a break, lying down, talking to a monitor, or Myoku or myself. A period here and there sitting in a chair can make sense. It's true that pain can enhance practice, and it's also true that pain can put us in a state where it's very difficult to practice. A middle path can make sense - to lean in a bit and experience, but perhaps take steps to moderate the pain.

So, a few things about sitting with a busy mind. There's good news here. Simply, we're becoming more aware of our thoughts, and as we do this we can become less a slave to them. Awareness heals. We're noticing and experiencing the planning thoughts, the self-conversation thoughts, thoughts of judgment, and self-judgment, positive thoughts, negative thoughts, thoughts of the future, thoughts of the past, maybe thoughts just for the sake of thinking.

Can we make these persistent thoughts our path? What is the practice here?

Can we be interested, curious, with a certain lightness of heart? Just watching the thoughts coming and going. Watching the tendency to grab on, maybe especially certain thoughts, that tend to be recurrent?

We cling to our thinking because it's so familiar, such a habit, and we're so identified with it. Thinking can be a valuable tool but add to our suffering when we get lost in self-centered thinking, in our story, in the contracted sphere of believing the thoughts - taken away from the here and now, missing our life.

What we call a concentrative practice can be helpful - counting the breath for instance. This is being aware of and silently counting each exhale, counting up, one to ten.

Reaching ten (the 10th exhale), we start over at one and repeat. If we notice we've been distracted by thought, we start over at one, without judging ourselves.

As the mind settles, we may come to feel the counting is something of a burden. In this case, try just following the breath (no counting), aware of its sensations in the body. Just the natural ebb and flow of it. If and when we notice we're distracted in thought, just gently return to an awareness of breath.

At this point we might try expanding our presence - add some environmental awareness. Listen to the sounds that are happening around us, for instance. We're attending to breathing and sounds, just that. And again, we return to that if we get distracted. We're getting to know the mind's thoughts better - what was the thought that just distracted me? This is all part of awareness.

I'll mention just a bit about posture. Minimizing tension or imbalance in the body can make settling the mind more possible. If you have questions or concerns about your sitting posture you might talk to one of the monitors or Myoku or myself.

Again, the good news is that who and what we are is larger than this getting caught up in self-centered thinking. We can get some spaciousness around those contracting thoughts. Simply, we can see ourselves doing it. I can hardly think of a better opportunity than Sesshin to perhaps gain some freedom from so easily believing the mind's me-based thoughts, where we go through life reacting.

Here, we can recognize we're going off, we can consciously refrain from being taken, and just return to the physicality of this present moment (feeling the body, experiencing the breath, and the environment - sounds, for instance). We can persist in the returning. The going off is OK - we just recognize our departure from this moment, refrain from entertaining the thoughts, and return. This has the valuable effect of strengthening our awareness muscle, of nurturing presence in our lives, living more fully.

As we do these practices, for the extended time we have here in Sesshin, we might experience a deepening quiet or stillness. The period where there's no thinking might get longer. Here we can experience our presence, our being. Perhaps a natural joy. We are this consciousness. Right here and right now. Always.

Last but not least, there might be that sense of a growing unity as Sesshin progresses, and for a period afterward. This has always helped me feel that the practice is worthwhile.

But regardless of whether your Sesshin experience is mostly distraction or mostly presence (it will likely be somewhere in between), it is worthwhile.