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Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

July 2015

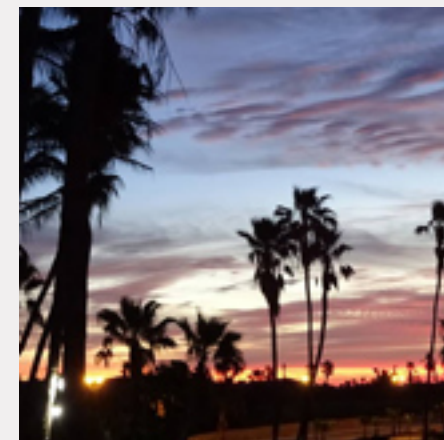
Loving Kindness—The Heart Has Room for It All

During our recent June retreat at Questhaven, all of the activities were threaded like beads on the strand of loving kindness: loving kindness for oneself, for others, for everything, including challenging situations, between persons or within ourselves (talks on ZCSD website).

Loving kindness practice can entice us from our romance with self-absorption, into the arms of compassion. It can act as a magnet, pulling toward it whatever needs gentle attention.

About twenty years ago, Ezra gave me a card, the Chinese calligraphy for *Love*. I didn't look at the back until recently, and discovered that the pictograms for *love* are "breath," and "of the heart." So for millennia, love, and loving kindness, have been infused with the heart's breath.

This ties in with French philosopher Blaise Pascal's reminder that "The heart has reasons, of which the mind knows nothing." What we sometimes call heart-awakening qualities include empathy, goodwill, loving kindness, compassion, remorse and



August Sesshin

Enrollment is open for the 5-day August sesshin (August 4-9). Please use our new online application to sign up. You may sign up for the first or last 3 days if you are unable to attend the full 5 days.

gratitude.

No matter what words we use, a central aspect of the loving kindness meditation is the *heart's breath*, a felt sense of the breathing in the chest center. Both the words and the heart's breath remind us to avoid the misguided assumption that with loving kindness practice, we're supposed to *feel* a particular way, like loving or kind. Nor is loving kindness a superficial way to imagine that we're sending warm feelings, when we're actually feeling the opposite.

The fact that loving kindness is physically grounded allows embodied awareness to penetrate the cells, where the residue of our anger and other separating emotions is stored. Even if the thoughts have become subliminal or unconscious, feeling into the body allows the stuck energy to become available, as life force.

The wording of the loving kindness meditation can vary. For many years I used the version of loving kindness from *Untrain Your Parrot*. Then shortly before our Paris retreat in May I decided to try the loving kindness version in Ezra's recent book, *The Authentic Life*. The reason for the change was to have a way see with fresh eyes.

Seeing anew in each moment is the foundation of "beginner mind," and teachers, above all, must remain lifelong learners. Who can claim to be immune from the re-emergence of longtime habits and patterns that have dug grooves in the amygdala? This fresh approach is serving as a spotlight, shining awareness into the recesses of ancient conditioning. It is also helping to reveal the kinship of loving kindness and other practices.

Full 5 days.

Practice Period

This year's practice Period will be from September 19 through October 17. More information and an application will be included in the September Newsletter.

Announcements

Sesshin Application

Click [here](#) to see this newsletter online.

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Loving kindness helps us discover why practice must continue for a lifetime, as part of our aspiration to appreciate the gift of this precious life. Certainly, it isn't our only practice. As we mature, we see the need to understand how various practice tools work together, and where they are appropriate. Nutritionist Estelle Davis was once asked "Are apricots good for you?" to which she responded, "Which apricot, where?" We can ask, "Which practice, where?" and choose, just as a carpenter knows when a hammer is appropriate, and when a screwdriver is better. It takes strong determination, and clarity, to decline the temptation to choose practices that are familiar or comfortable, yet perhaps not helpful in a given situation.

Meditation must also be practical, to be of service where it's most needed. Here's an example: on Memorial Day, I had an anaphylactic shock episode, probably precipitated by eating some unknown thing I was allergic to. The symptoms—difficulty in breathing, hives, extreme itching and swelling—were familiar, from decades of asthma and severe allergies.

There's nothing like being almost unable to breathe to get your attention. So I used my asthma inhaler and took diphenhydramine right away. Then we phoned the on-call nurse, who said to go to the emergency room immediately. The trip there was a challenge. Fortunately, it was possible to engage the basic practice of open awareness, centered in the body, environment and breath; however, the constricted breathing made me grateful for Rumi's reminder that "the heart has room for it all."

Until the medication kicked in, the environment was the primary focus—the car, the freeway, the clouds. A quiet voice whispered the reminder that the air of breath and the air of sky

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are intimately connected—"one and the same, and yet different," as my first teacher Maezumi Roshi often said.

I don't want to romanticize this—I was scared! However, the grace of years of practicing open awareness and embodied loving kindness helped avert the tendency to become captured in panic. If I'd become overwhelmed, captured in a narrow tunnel in which the current difficulty seems to be the only thing going on, it could have exacerbated a serious medical condition.

In this situation, meditation and medication worked together. As the breathing eased, it was possible to turn to another heart-based meditation, that we sometimes call "The Shared Pain, the Compassionate Heart." In this meditation, on the tides of the heart breath we bring awareness to our own adversity, and then also include others we know who are experiencing difficulties—illness, specific situations, or disheartenment. We breathe the adversity in on the in-breath; and on the out-breath, we extend compassion to both ourselves and others. Being in a hospital emergency room, surrounded by people of all ages, with grave conditions, was a strong reminder that adversity is one of life's few guarantees. And staying with the heart's breath was a reminder that the heart has room for it all.

Elizabeth Hamilton, *Meditations at the Edge*

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