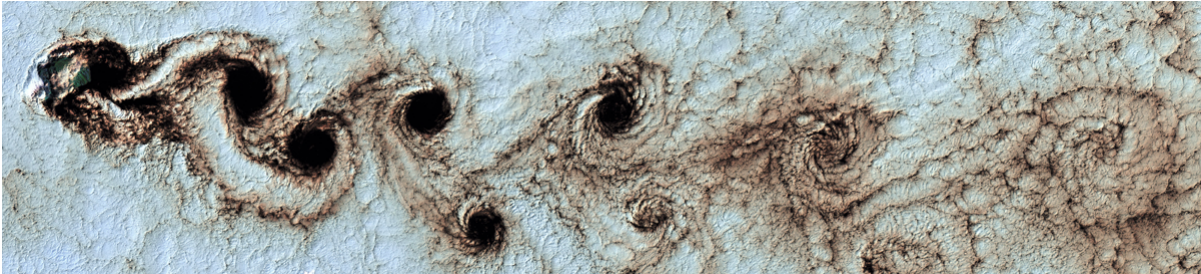


Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

July–August 2020



Practicing with Changes

Recently, visiting teacher Elihu Genmyo Smith spoke to the sangha about the changing nature of Life, about Life as nothing but change. Just to sit is to notice sensations, feelings, thoughts changing moment by moment. And in the big picture, it's no secret that we are now in a time of tremendous change. To live through a global pandemic, with a climate in crisis, in a country once again called to account for racial injustice; to live with difficulties in our own community, along with the myriad twists and turns of everyday life, is to wake up every day to a changing world.

Of course our lives are disrupted. *Of course* our hearts at times are aching. Our nervous systems are responding to all of this. The uncertainty, the sorrow, the loss. All of it.

So is it possible in such a time to experience our Life in a deep and genuine way without becoming overwhelmed? Is it possible to open to our pain in a way that lightens our heart of its burden?

Let's look a bit more at change and how we can practice with it.

Change is often hard for us because, whether we know it or not, we are continually making appointments with Life,

Wednesday and Saturday Sitting Programs During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Zen Center of San Diego is conducting two Zoom meetings, one for Wednesday sitting and the other for Saturday. The program will begin at 6:20 pm on Wednesdays and 9:50 am on Saturdays. You can access the meeting on your computer or your phone and you are cordially invited to join us. Please [email us](#) and we will send the links to you.

[Announcements](#)
[Sesshin Application](#)

Practice asks us

not to see

ourselves as a

fixed self that is

and change often dis-appoints us. But that is only a problem if we hold onto the assumption that we were making in the first place. *When I retire, I'm going to travel a lot... This year, I'm determined to hear some good live music ... I'm so looking forward to being with my grandkids this summer.*

Making plans is okay. It's also okay when our plans are thwarted. And it's okay to feel sad when that happens. It's how we practice with all of it that makes the difference. And whether it's a small disappointment or a serious loss—even perhaps the death of someone we love—the essential practice is the same. Practice asks us not to see ourselves as a fixed self that is having this experience happening to us, but rather to simply be the experiencing. If (in our view) we are a fixed self and this is happening to us, then that invariably throws us into self-centered thinking: *My whole summer is ruined ... I can't stand it ... It's too much.* And we reinforce the fiction of a separate self.

Imagine that Life gives us a jolt. Our systems respond, let's say, with a flurry of that energy we call "anxiety." A quiver running through the body. The mind of habit recognizes the cue and, quick as can be, supplies a conditioned thought response: *I'm never going to have any fun anymore. It sucks. When is this ever going to end?* The practicing mind also recognizes the quiver as a cue—but the cue is not a cue to jump into a storyline; it's a cue to practice and to be aware.

If thoughts have already started to run, then an appropriate practice might be the 3 R's. *Recognize* that we are thinking, *refrain* from continuing, and *return* to being this moment. If we're quick enough, we may not have to refrain—we may be able to simply allow ourselves to be the quivering.

To the habit mind, the energy of so-called anxiety, or so-called anger, breeds story, and our tendency is to invest in the story, the story of I, the story of me, the story of you that is not me, the story of me fighting me—many me's squabbling. But if we pay attention, we can pop out of the story. And then! we hear the birds, then! we feel the sensations in our feet, then! we really see

having

this experience

happening to

us, but rather to

simply be the

experiencing.

our child's face, and that flurry of energy we call anxiety—it can arise, and have its being, and pass on through.

Our task as practitioners is, over and over, to choose this shift to awareness. And yet, equally, our task is not to shame ourselves when we don't. As Pema Chodron says, we don't want to be grim about this. We can even have fun with it. Reconstituting a self over and over isn't bad. It is simply what we do as human beings. And most likely, we're going to keep doing it for the rest of our lives.

This is one side of our experience. One foot in the pair, walking. And the other side is that we can see that. We can see our entanglement, and with the wisdom of practice and the kind light of awareness, we can find our way back to oneness, to peace.

Let's look again: Something happens that we don't like, and quick as a flash, our belly tightens. The conditioned mind, the mind of habit, is so sure it knows what that tightness is saying. It's saying, *NO! I won't. I refuse.* The practicing mind *doesn't* know. The practicing mind sees an opportunity and remembers, *Pay attention. Stay out of the story. Be curious.*

Curiosity is open to discovery. It wonders, Is it possible to be present to this experience, to let it reveal itself within the unconditional friendliness of awareness? Not separating it from "the rest of Life," but experiencing it within the fullness of the present moment.

Do we see that accessing this wider container of awareness (which is not a container at all) is an act of compassion? That this is relying on heartmind? And that in relying on heartmind, it is possible to connect to the benevolence that has room for our suffering, can bear witness to it, can allow it to arise but also to pass away?

Sometimes, it doesn't seem possible to pop out of the story. Instead, we pop from one anxious or obsessive thought to another. It seems that fear or anger or grief fills every room of our house. The house is collapsing around us; the house is burning.

Even then, practice can help, if we keep it simple.

Maybe we simply breathe in and out of the center of the chest—if we like, placing a hand there to give ourselves a sense of touch and to deepen the connection.

Maybe, while experiencing our breath, we keep maintaining sensory awareness in our hands—or we choose a careful listening practice, attending to each sound as it arises.

Maybe we pause to reflect on what we are grateful for in the moment.

Whatever we choose, let's remember that our vow is to be present to Life As It Is. It's not to be present to Suffering As It Is. Yes, we want to be present to our suffering. Suffering is part of it—but only part. If we hold our suffering too tightly, we trap it and make it worse. By giving it space to breathe within a wider field of awareness, warmed by the heart, we set it free.

Times of great disruption can be really educational, because eventually the most obstinate fixed self that we thought we were cannot stand up to the onslaught of change. Assumptions that were embedded too deeply for us to see are exposed. This may be painful, but it's also full of possibility if we can truly pay attention—and if we learn to rely on heartmind.

—Kate Watson-Forbess

Shedding the light of awareness in our dark corners fuels the process of healing.