

These Are the Good Old Days

The artist Paul Klee said: "Imagine you are dead. After many years of exile you are permitted to cast a single glance earthward. You see a lamppost and an old dog lifting his leg against it. You are so moved that you cannot stop sobbing."

"Years of exile." What does that mean? For years we've been captured in the exile of separation, having lost sight of our true nature, our Real Being. We may not even be aware of being in exile, since we're so accustomed to seeing life through the eyes of the *ego-self*—that incomplete and often inaccurate identity that we've held for so long, which one reading calls "the illusion of a separate self, to which our suffering clings."

When we're caught in this painful exile, we may hear about interconnectedness, yet be unclear about what it is. This is because our long-standing, forceful belief in our separateness keeps us feeling lonely, alienated, and cut off in some way from others and the fullness of life. Exiled.

One clue that we're in this exile is holding the belief



February Sesshin (Friday, February 15 through Monday, February 18) is open for sign-ups. This sesshin usually fills up fast, so if you would like to attend please send in your application.

Revised Board Policy Given the #MeToo movement, the Kavanaugh hearings, and multiple other incidents of high profile sexual harassment allegations that have come to light nationally this year, the 2018 ZCSD board took a look at our own (2005) policy and found that it needed to be updated. This will be done during 2019 to include a procedure for practitioners can bring concerns and complaints to the board. When completed, the revised policy will be made available to the practice community. *The 2018 Board*

that “the good old days” were in the past, perhaps in our teens or twenties. Or we may expect that the good days are up ahead: once we get the right partner, or our current partner shapes up, or we get the right job, or retire—or what?

This kind of past-think and future-think guarantees that we’ll continue to exile ourselves from the one place and time in which contentment is possible: now, and here.

We often admire the curiosity and wonder with which some people greet and are amazed by everyday things. At the end of sittings we say the words “appreciate this precious life.” This appreciation starts with the capacity to be present, as Ram Dass’s 1971 book *Be Here Now* put it—a book which helped spark interest in meditation in the U.S.

It’s easy to lose sight of the fact that *being here now* is all we can count on. This is especially true when the going gets rough, and one of life’s few guarantees is that everyone has challenges at times.

Those of us who are middle class and live in the U.S.—probably the majority of meditators—may not be faced with the same difficulties as those living where there’s little or no access to health care, clean water, sufficient food, or shelter. We tend to take these amenities for granted, perhaps out of familiarity or entitlement.

Fortunately, the meditative tools Zen provides can help us see life afresh. The transition usually takes time, since our capacity for presence frequently goes

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dormant. This tends to happen when that part of our ego or mental structure, the part that could sink a ship, causes amnesia to cloud our aspiration. At such times, we're prone to become stuck in emotional reactions, like feeling chronically burdened or stressed, looking for what's wrong, and self-indulgence. We may even fall into the unintended hypocrisy of assuming that we're on the path, when we've fallen into a ditch. Are you aware of a habitual view that causes you to lose sight of what's right with the world, other people, and yourself?

Those who come to ZCSD regularly know the value of cultivating open awareness, compassion, and connectedness. We're also reminded of the importance of *intending* to be present, with the kind of persistence in practice that helps redirect awareness back toward life's many ordinary wonders.

To rekindle our appreciation of life, let's contemplate some readily-overlooked reminders that "these are the good old days." As we consider these, the words will stay more physically grounded if we engage in what St. Benedict called "listening with the ear of the heart." This involves feeling the breathing in the chest center, while reading the words.

As you read, it's helpful to take a few slightly deeper breaths periodically, as a reminder to feel the sensations of breathing in the chest center. Now, let the words float on the heart's breath, as we reflect on some of the wonders of life:

- The ability to hear: listen for what can be heard

right now.

- The ability to see: look around, or even step outside for a bit to survey the panorama.
- The ability to sit upright by ourselves, even if we occasionally need canes or walkers. At least we're not currently bedridden. Continue to return periodically to feeling the breath in the chest center.
- There are the many things that the body takes care of, without any intervention on our part: the heart keeps itself beating, the food digests, and the breathing continues—often without much awareness on our part. And if challenges arise with these things, we're also likely to have access to medical assistance, to help them function as well as possible.
- We're able to perform tasks that we don't particularly like, or do our best in a job that isn't one we would have chosen, hopefully without too much grumbling.
- We also have the ability to actually *feel* sensations—the ones we like, as well as the ones we don't want. For instance, recently I wasn't able to come to ZCSD on Wednesday night, after a medical procedure for two rotator cuff tears. The pain was a sharp reminder of the times that I'm *not* in pain—times that often pass unnoticed. I also became acutely appreciative of how valuable a shoulder is, trying its best to serve, despite years of misuse.
- The next night Ezra got food poisoning—a reminder of how we assume that our food will be uncontaminated and healthful.
- Speaking of good food, there's also the "food"

we ingest through media—things we read, watch, or engage with via social media. Is it more likely to be good food for our being, or not?

- Do we appreciate the fact that we have sufficient unscheduled or discretionary time to allow us to engage in activities we enjoy, like hobbies or entertainment? (heart's breath).
- And we have time to meditate. We know what happens when we let it slide, or become haphazard about daily practice. This can leave us stuck in a well of dissatisfaction.

These are just a few of the daily wonders for which we can be grateful if we're paying attention. If we find ourselves engaged in negative filtering, it's helpful to remember what Eldridge Cleaver said years ago: "You either have to be part of the solution, or you're going to be part of the problem." This can refer to our daily life, as well as issues on the world stage.

"Being part of the solution" starts with the willingness and ability to be present—to *be here now*. It may seem odd to speak of being here now, since we're *always* "here now." Yet how often are our minds far from where our feet are, from where our actual lives are unfolding?

Let's reflect regularly on what meditative practices we find helpful in returning to present-moment awareness. And, to conclude, let's renew our aspiration to be as awake as possible to the present moment. That's the fast lane to returning from our "self"-imposed exile, to the realization that *these are*

the good old days

Elizabeth Hamilton

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