Zen Center
OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter September-October 2026



Being Just This Moment

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

How easy, on starting to read those words, to think consciously or otherwise, "Oh, I know this quote," or, "Oh, Suzuki Roshi!" And right there, in leaping into thought rather than simply receiving and experiencing, we miss the possibility that this time Suzuki's words might land just a little differently for us. And more fundamentally than that, we miss the freshness of a moment of our life.

No In-Person Sitting on Halloween

On October 31, sitting will be online only. We'll have two periods of zazen then service, and we'll end early.

2026 Sesshin Dates

December 28–31, 2026

https://www.zencentersandiego.org/schedule/sesshin.php

What might it be like to really live from beginner's mind? And can we sharpen our practice to live that way more?

The full quote goes like this: "If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything, it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

It's not difficult to intuit what Suzuki is saying here. And there are many moments when this is alive and real for us—it's not theory. But it's also easy, if we're honest, to recognize how habituated we are to operating out of well-developed patterns and biases, preconceptions and expectations. This is why practice is so challenging and so essential in our lives.

When we see a beautiful piece of art or look out from a mountaintop for miles around, it's easy to experience the wonder of life. Tragedy can take us there, too, disarming us, waking us up directly. But how do we maintain beginner's mind with a coworker who habitually annoys us? Or when much of our life is routine? Or when fear arises, again, in the middle of the night and the thoughts that come are so predictable?

Can we remember even in these situations to summon beginner's mind? Is it possible to recognize a familiar pattern and yet be aware that this moment, with pattern arising, is brand-new? The thought that we've had a hundred times, can we be present for it, hearing it *right now* with fresh ears, or seeing it clearly with the mind's eye? Can we also be present as it passes away, dying into boundless awareness?

Knowing the pattern is not the same as knowing

Wednesday Programming
https://www.zencentersandiego.org/

The Sexual Misconduct Complaint Procedure and Code of Ethical Conduct for Teachers/Practice Leaders can be found on the ZCSD website under "Policies."
http://www.zencentersandiego.org/Policies/

"A pattern may be familiar, but the moment is new—and open to 'many possibilities.'"

the moment. And right there is a key to freedom.

Now, Zen is not stupid. And beginner's mind doesn't mean ignorance or gullibility. We don't forget that fire is hot or traffic can kill us if we rush into the street. We don't abandon that knowledge. And similarly, in life we learn certain things about ourselves as individuals—and this is useful knowledge to have.

For example, I don't eat tomatoes, because they give me aphthous ulcers, which are very painful. I'm free to eat them, but if I do, they will cause me pain. So, I avoid them. I don't tell myself, "Today, I will eat a tomato with beginner's mind." And while I am open to the body changing over time, I place no expectation on practice to "fix" the sensitivity.

Sometimes, though, we do expect practice to fix or solve things, don't we? This is quite common: "If I sit enough, surely this difficulty will go away. Surely, I won't be triggered anymore. Surely, I'll finally become the person I think I'm supposed to be."

But practice doesn't offer us a formula. Some things heal. Some things lighten up. And some things—it seems—remain part of the landscape, even as our relationship to them shifts over time.

Let's say Jane had a parent who was distant and difficult to reach. Perhaps something in that relationship continues to be tender many years later. And perhaps even now a certain kind of silence, a certain way of holding back, can feel threatening to Jane.

And let's say Tom learned to stay quiet as a child, maybe because he was quickly judged when he

spoke; or because in his house there were lots of secrets, and he wasn't supposed to tell; or because he had a violent parent, and staying quiet was one way of hiding. Years later he still withdraws, still wants to side-step conversations that feel tense or complicated.

We can imagine that if these two got into a relationship at some point, navigating those silences would be difficult for them both.

In zen, becoming aware of patterns is par for the course. And when a pattern is triggered, the practice, though it may feel challenging, is not complicated: It's just noticing—and experiencing—what is arising, without clinging to judgments about it (noting judgments might be part of it). It's maintaining the spaciousness of present-moment awareness and allowing freedom from the story, freedom to respond with flexibility.

Present-moment awareness is the terrain of openness and possibility. Joko called it "a wider container of awareness." Whatever words you use, it's benevolent; it's not caught in reactivity. So, again: A pattern may be familiar, but the moment is new—and open to "many possibilities," including an opportunity to decline the bait that's offered as a reaction starts to form.

Getting unstuck doesn't need to be glum. It can often be simple and light, playful even. (I said to Genmyo recently, "Life moves fast!" And he shot back, "Yes, so we need to forget self very quickly.")

We're told that late in life, Buddha was asked, "What is life like for you?" (I hear the question, "What is it like to be awake?) And Buddha replied, "I am always at the beginning."

He didn’t talk about completing a journey, or getting somewhere, or finally solving something. He simply said, “I am always at the beginning.” And surely to be always at the beginning is to live from beginner’s mind. As an old friend of mine said, to live that way you must touch a place that has no “because of’s.” A moment lived in beginner’s mind is a moment of beginninglessness. And there again is a key to freedom.

Yes, we want practice to solve our problems. And practice does bring change. It changes how we relate to ourselves. It changes how we respond. It softens and thaws and tenderizes hard, stuck places.

But some things we may practice with—on and off—for a lifetime. That doesn’t mean that practice has failed us or that we’ve failed at practice. The point isn’t to strip away all our sensitivities but rather to become aware of them, to be able to recognize them when they’re active, and not to be their prisoner: “Ah, fear is arising.” “Oh, here is grief.” Not, “Why this again?” Or, “I should be done with this by now!” Just noticing and experiencing and letting go of story.

However often we’ve felt fear, however often we’ve felt grief, we have never been exactly who we are in this moment, and if fear, or grief, is arising in this moment, it has never arisen until now in quite the same way. Sure, there are patterns. But this moment has not happened before. And even as we want to jump in and judge it, categorize it, react to it, it is still unfolding, and if we do jump in, we miss it. Beginner’s mind is not something artificial that we impose on reality; reality itself is inviting us to

experience it.

In the last line of our Practice Principles, we say, "Being just this moment, compassion's way." Alternatively, we *could* say, "Being just this moment, the way of not arriving with blinkers on and our mind made up." Or simply, "Being this moment, beginner's mind way."

I once talked to Joko in daisan about compassion, and she quoted that line of our vows. Then she said, "Being this moment is talking to me. Not the moon, not the dove, not the war in the Balkans—but right here now, talking to me."

The dove was a dove I had buried in the garden during sesshin. It had a dab of sky blue on its eye and a pale apricot blush on its belly. And no doubt I had told Joko about it.

Being fully present—that's compassion, Joko said. "It doesn't have to feel sad."

Now, there's a practice!

—Myoku

There is only one thing we need to know. It's utterly simple. Our job, as humans who want to experience life fully, is to pay attention when we experience something.

—Joko Beck