

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

August 2019



Lessons from Home

Look in any direction across the globe, and it won't be long before you see tired and frightened families fleeing their homes in a desperate quest to find shelter in a strange land. Whether they're seeking refuge from gang violence, poverty, extreme weather, political persecution or all-out war, they're prepared to leave behind everything they know in the hope of building a new life somewhere safer and more prosperous.

As this happens again and again, we see divisions within nations deepening, with some inhabitants moved to extend a compassionate welcome while others feel threatened and harden into anger. In some way, all these groups—those fleeing, those opening their arms and those determined to shut others out—are grappling with the question of what home is and how we make a home for ourselves in a troubled world.

I've lived in the United States for decades, but my home of origin is Scotland, which is a part of the United Kingdom. Recently, with the U.S. polarized in its views and the U.K.

August Sesshin applications are still being accepted. This is a three-day sesshin (8/8–8/11).

Practice Period will be from September 14 through October 12. Please leave this period open so you can attend all activities. Practice Period information will be in the next newsletter.

October Practice Period Sesshin starts on Thursday evening, October 3 and ends on Sunday, October 6. Applications will be accepted starting August 6. As part of the Practice Period, this sesshin fills quickly, so please apply early.

teetering on the brink of leaving the European Union, there's been plenty of opportunity to reflect on what the concept of "home" means, both in the everyday sense and in zen practice.

While our homeland is our country, home in its narrowest, most concrete sense is a shelter; usually familiar, and if we're fortunate, relatively safe. Beyond that, the concept of "home" suggests warmth and belonging, connectedness and sanctuary; it may carry the imprint of a mother's love. Whether home had these connotations for us growing up or whether the concept has never been more than a hunger in us—a yearning—this bigger sense of home implies harmony and is not tied to places we have lived. Wherever we are, we might say, "I feel at home here," if we experience a deep sense of ease and connection. It can happen as we're walking in the woods, or sitting by the ocean, or being jostled by the crowd in New York City. Often what we really mean is "I can be myself here; I feel comfortable being who I am."

And that intersection of self and home is a good place to turn to practice—because our sense of home (like our sense of self) can have such deep resonance for us that we are inclined to accept it as a given. Yet if we begin to look at it from a practice perspective, numerous questions emerge:

What does home mean to us? Sights, sounds, tastes, smells? People and places? Arts and culture? Norms and laws? Values we live by?

Do we know how much of our identity is wrapped up in our sense of home? Is there a clue here as to why "feeling at home" can sometimes just mean "being myself"?

If the feeling of being at home implies ease and comfort and often familiarity, how does that square with the practice challenge of stepping outside of our comfort zone and resting in the unknown? How does it square with residing in each moment as it arises, brand-new?

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Over a lifetime of practice, how does our relationship with home shift? Does anything about it stay the same?

Do we see the trap that can ensnare us when a heartfelt sense of belonging morphs into the decision that “I” have a home that belongs to “me”; that defines me and is mine, so much so that when that home is threatened, who I am is threatened, too—even though zen practice shows us what a ropy, contradictory set of constructs that “I” really is.

What gives us security and the comfort of familiarity may not align with our practice aspiration to wake up, which often takes us to our edge; and unexamined, our sense of home can harbor identities, attachments, and blind loyalties that may be easily provoked by a perceived threat. Caught in reactivity, we contract, lash out, shut down, defend. We try to protect ourselves by struggling to define ourselves as separate.

There’s a great irony in the Brexit debate: What has stymied the separation process so far is the fact that the U.K. is not an island. There’s a land border with Ireland, and that border has been porous since the peace agreement was signed between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in 1998, after 30 years of hostilities. If Brexit causes any hardening of that border, this fragile peace could be threatened—and, so far, no solution to this problem has been found.

We’re not islands either. And when we take a defensive posture and insist on being separate, we disrupt the fragile balance of this miraculous life that we are all a part of.

We need shelter, food, a place to sleep. These are the fundamentals. But to be at home in the world as it changes, in little ways and in big ways, we must know what we’re attached to; and while we can all make efforts to preserve what we love, there will be losses along the way. Then our practice will be to sit with anger, fear, grief, even desperation—and through that sitting to go deeper into our shared humanity, to let life school us in humility, compassion and perseverance.

Throughout our lives, there may continue to be places that are especially dear to us, but across the arc of practice, a greater capacity develops for being at home in any situation, familiar or unfamiliar, comfortable or uncomfortable. Developing that capacity takes years of studying the self, and forgetting the self, that we think we are. It's not a capacity or a skill we perfect—sometimes we cannot do it at all—but we can get better at it with practice.

As that happens, opportunities increase for cooperation and community, for empathy and generosity, for development of the global consciousness needed to address the problems of our planet. That same arc of practice that loosens our identity with a fixed self brings about another shift, and home becomes not only the shelter—or the country—we live in but the planet we share and are called on to tend.

The way we inhabit our lives is by being present right here, right now. Permanence was never promised. But the wonder of the universe, in its sorrow and its joy, is offering itself moment by moment, flickering between life and death, light and dark, the known and the unknown.

May we exist like a lotus, at home in the muddy water; thus, we bow to life as it is.

—Kate Watson-Forbess