

Zen Center

OF SAN DIEGO

ZCSD Newsletter

September-October 2025



We Will Never Get Everything Sorted

Lately, having learned that the Center will need to move from its longtime home next year, we've been talking a fair bit about impermanence. It's hardly a newsflash. Our life has been an expression of ongoing change since before we were born, and every living thing in the universe has been changing along with us. We have never been separate from that. On some levels this isn't difficult for us to understand and even to accept. As we look around and listen up, the evidence of change is everywhere—in our bodies, our streets, our society; in the land and the weather and the seasons of the year.

2025 Sesshin Dates

December 27–31, 2025

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

October Programming Notes

<https://www.zencentersandiego.org/>

But actually living awake—present and appreciative—through all the twists and turns of a changing life is challenging for us as human beings. Some changes we like, some we don't, and while a sense of impermanence may steady us through dark times, it can lend the good times a poignant or bittersweet flavor. We want to hold on. Pushed and pulled by appetites and fears, dreams and doubts, we miss the direct experience of our lives.

But who is this "we" here? In this case, it's the little self, the me we take ourselves to be, the someone that along the way became synonymous with our likes and dislikes, our opinions and positions, our ego identity. "I don't eat white cheese, only orange." Harmless to choose orange, but are we going to fight about it?

Some families get sliced up like a pie. And God forbid you encroach on a piece that "belongs" to a sibling:

*My sister is artistic; I'm academic.
I'll never be an athlete. My brother, he's the athletic one in the family.
I was the shy one. I learned to take a back seat.*

Identities begin to seem solid, desires harden into demands, and fears stiffen into numbness or quasi-paralysis. Energy becomes frozen. And it happens because we've come to see ourselves as a fixed self, separate from life "out there." We tell ourselves that life "out there" changes, but we *don't*. That is nonsense of course, and we know it! But still, we protect our fixed sense of self as if our life depended upon it; we get caught in a self-centered dream.

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/>

"Impermanence is hardly a newsflash. Our life has been an expression of ongoing change since before we were born."

Zazen allows us to experience how clinging generates suffering and to see the folly in letting that continue. It gives us the opportunity, through diligent practice, to realign with reality and enjoy the freedom this affords.

In his Genjōkōan, Dōgen Zenji writes, "When we perceive the body and mind in a confused way and grasp all things with a discriminating mind, we mistakenly think that the self-nature of the mind is permanent. When we intimately practice and return right here, it is clear that all things have no [fixed] self."

What does he mean by "no fixed self," or "nonself," or even "no self," as it's sometimes called? Ed Mushin Russell from Prairie Zen Center puts it simply: "[Nonself] doesn't mean we don't function as individuals. Our functioning *requires* a sense of self. It *does* mean that we don't exist as separate, fixed selves. Nothing exists as a separate fixed entity. If we look for the self, it's nowhere to be found. Our sense of self turns out to be just another experience. And, like all experience, it's a process of constant change and dynamic flow."

We're not asked to believe this but, rather, to investigate it for ourselves. Again, it's a simple concept to grasp in the abstract, but practice challenges us to live ongoing changing as the experiential reality of our life. That's harder. Over and over, we get caught; over and over we learn to stay free. It's the adventure of a lifetime.

Recently I broke out a new mouse toy for our cat, Meadow. This is a mouse on a string that you move about with a wand. The cat loves this toy, and she's very good at catching her prey—but when she does, she knows that if she doesn't let

go, the game is over. So, she releases the mouse. In the same way—to stay in the game, so to speak—we need to see that clinging isn't the answer. It keeps us trapped in a self-centered view. By contrast, when we stay in relationship and life is flowing, skillful response becomes possible.

True, letting go can sometimes be more complex for us than it is for Meadow. It depends. If we're settled, it can be simple to watch thoughts arise and pass. Or to drop the storyline. But when emotion-thought is strong, we really have to feel a way into that emotional terrain, enter the belly of the beast, as it were, just as the fairytales tell us. For instance, if we're stuck on a thought like, "I'm useless," there's likely a mix of anxiety and hopelessness there. That can be uncomfortable, but if we can be those sensations intimately, experientially, the pain begins to heal, even as it teaches us patience and compassion.

In his commentary of Genjōkōan, Shohaku Okumura reminds us of something essential: "The subject of practice is not the personal self but all beings. To practice is to awaken to the self that is connected to all beings." Yes, as we sit, we see how we struggle, how we argue with life or try to escape it, how sometimes we cling. This is an aspect of practice. But beyond that, as attachments loosen, the opportunity arises to receive the fullness of the moment as it is—now this, now that; we like it, we don't. When something skillful can be done in response, we do it. When not, we continue to practice. Practice itself is skillful action—let's not lose sight of that.

Also in Genjōkōan, Dōgen Zenji writes, "Flowers fall even though we love them; weeds grow even though we dislike them." This is true in daily life,

and it's true in sitting, as well. Experiences we like don't last, and despite our best efforts, things we don't like happen. The mind settles and there is a clearing, a sense of peace. We like that. But then it's gone again, and we're back in the weeds of our habit thoughts, with conditioned beliefs and reactions popping up again. That can be annoying and disappointing for us, but it's the way things are, and so we practice for a lifetime.

Often we hear that zen practice is not about achieving a goal, but if we're honest, we want the goal and not the process, at least some of the time. We want to be peaceful; we want the garden of our mind to be free of weeds. But we are always living in relation to a world we do not control. With ourselves changing and the world changing, we will never get everything sorted; there will always be weeding to do. The joyful news is that it's honest, down-to-earth work, it is freeing, and it helps to bring about a little harmony in the universe.

—*Myoku*

The best way to let go is to notice the thoughts as they come up and to acknowledge them.

—*Joko Beck*