

# Zen Center

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O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

January-February 2026



## Working With Whatever Comes

As human beings, we have a powerful tendency to avoid discomfort, which might include pushing away unresolved matters that sit awaiting our attention. Life has a way of encouraging us to cast some light of awareness onto these dark places. Maybe you've heard the expression, "What we resist persists." We can miss a lot of our life being a slave to what we push away.

To rise above slavery, or tyranny, takes some faith, intention, courage and persistence. And this applies to our practice. The ego, our strong sense of being separate, at the center of our world, is what we call the "self-centered dream" here at the Center. It could be described as tyrannical,

### 2025 Sesshin Dates

March 19-22, 2026

June 10-14, 2026

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

### Wednesday

#### Programming

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

and if we don't see how it's working in our life, and how it's causing our suffering, we are its slave. I don't feel this is an overstatement. Cultivating awareness makes us more conscious of how the dream is working in us.

If you've practiced awhile, you've probably experienced the difference between being "caught in the self-centered dream" and being present, awake in this very moment. It's the difference between slavery and freedom.

Because of our conditioning, staying in a freer state can be a challenge—we can feel compelled to dive back into self-centeredness, believing in and holding onto the identity-based thoughts that arise. Our conditioned state can seem so welcoming! It's known territory: we're attached to our opinions, our identity, our habits and escapes, to our being-right and even to our being-wrong.

To really delve into this matter, as we are doing with our practice, has been called radical. Okay, then, we are radicals. I'm glad we are all here. We can help each other—and this is true worldwide, in all human endeavors. There is untold power here, in working together—power with, not power over.

Freedom lies in awareness, in presence, in stillness, in connectedness. I know of no better opportunity to expand awareness than full participation in our practice. Don't expect 100% perfection in your endeavor—most important is to do the best you can, to stay with the practice as best you can. To know what the practice is. The fact that we have the capability to do this, to take the path of less suffering, a step at a time—this is a kind of grace.

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/>

*"Freedom lies in awareness, in presence, in stillness, in connectedness."*

On this path of self-discovery, there will be times when you feel free and times when you feel stuck. Actually, when you feel stuck, that can present the best opportunity to better know not-being-stuck. We might be grateful for this opportunity, even if it's hard.

A word about stillness and silence, as they relate here. There is some difference between these two, as I see it. Silence is a lack of sounds, like in the middle of the night. Stillness is more an inner state, presence in this moment, being alert, not taken by the voice in the head. Stillness is always available regardless of how noisy or quiet it is environmentally, because it's our nature.

Silence, quiet, lack of noise, can be helpful for uncovering our inherent stillness. We like it quiet when we do zazen, and likely a good part of the time it is, but periods of noise (a nearby string trimmer or chainsaw, noisy voices, or traffic, for example) can help us to develop inner stillness, presence in the face of disturbances, if we stay aware. Part of the practice, in this instance, is becoming aware that we are, perhaps, judging the sound to be disturbing and therefore "bad." We can feel what that upset is. That's a bigger awareness. So, noise or other disturbances are actually good news for our practice effort. In being aware of thoughts and body sensations, we can see, and feel, how we react and cause ourselves suffering—that's a valuable thing to see.

We also have the opportunity to simply watch and notice our inner noise—the unsettled mind, the almost steady stream of self-centered thoughts, the judgments, and the fears that may parade before us as we sit. There's no goal to change anything; the practice is just to apply awareness to whatever is happening. This is grist for our

mill. We can move toward the experience of that ever-present Stillness, our Being, and a base of wisdom that informs our movement forward.

In our practice, we might be cruising along with presence and equanimity, a feeling of connection, or we might be experiencing a pull of negative thoughts and emotions, encountering physical pain, maybe feeling quite separate. We might be somewhere in between. It's all okay. Staying with our pain, experiencing its characteristics, whether physical or emotional, or noticing uncomfortable thoughts, is valuable practice. Remember to be merciful to yourself. This is not about self-judgment or self-punishment.

Practice involves seeing and perhaps befriending our many aspects. We may meet pessimism, stubbornness, judgments, joy, empathy, forgiveness, creative ideas—all these and more may turn up. Watching the passing show with some interest and curiosity can help us to take it more lightly. Our life experience, beliefs and conditioning are what they are. We adapted to survive and did survive. We might appreciate that, while also appreciating our aspiration to live with less suffering going forward, to live more awake.

There is often a transition that happens in our sitting. We might start by buckling down, being strictly aware of our thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and returning to this moment. This is valuable practice, particularly initially. At a point, however, we may find ourselves just naturally relaxing more into this here-and-now, moving into stillness with more of an effortless effort, and the "buckling down" can ease. Relaxing, quieting, opening—very simple.

Practice is our opportunity to settle and go

deeper, to move through, and let ourselves drop into Beingness. Into being just as we are.

Again, being as we are may include discomfort. It may include contentment. Whatever it is, our aspiration and intention can be to stay present with it. Simple but challenging, this can be the way, even as part of us persistently wants to go off into thinking or fantasizing.

We used to be reminded by our founding teacher, Joko Beck, that not doing the practice is harder than doing it. Staying in the dark about why we suffer, we go on and on in our suffering ways. Casting the light of awareness on the pull of our self-centered dream leads to greater freedom, to the joy of living more fully.

And, as we're all interconnected, what helps us helps others. This journey of self-discovery benefits all beings.

—*Chuck Sweet*

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In the midst of movement and chaos, keep stillness inside of you.  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

—*Joko Beck*