



**The Open Palm School of Zen  
at the Zen Center of Los Angeles**

# **Handbook for Training Council Facilitators**

Council is an integral practice at the Open Palm School of Zen. It is a practice that hones our capacity to listen deeply, speak from the heart, and plunge into our shared experience of life. This handbook is for training facilitators of Council at our School. It is also recommended reading for all participants of our Council processes and for an understanding of ZCLA's training culture.

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# 1. An Introduction to Council at ZCLA

Council is an age-old tribal practice of sitting around the fire and sharing which has re-emerged in our time. ZCLA began to use council practice in 1997, and it has had significant impact on how we practice Zen and on the organization and Sangha. It is a core practice of the Zen Peacemaker Order.

Council is a practice of relationship and of building community. We commit to a process of empathic listening and heartfelt communication. Council practice helps to nurture authentic communication, non-judgmental listening, and a direct, honest, and compassionate speaking style. It represents a shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of deep listening and thoughtful, reflective speaking. The physical form of council is a circle, which emphasizes inclusion and the equality of all participants.

Council is a skillful means for the awakening of both the individual and the community. Through council practice, we experience and appreciate the inherent diversity and complexity of ourselves-and-others and of our life together. Council creates an intentional container for the conditions of the arising of collective wisdom, which is the knowledge and insight that comes through the expanded consciousness of a group.

Councils and Circles are held in many different venues throughout the Zen Center's organization and the Sangha. A Circle is an organizational form of core participants who hold a sphere of practice, such as the Tenzo Circle, Health Care Circle, Teachers Circle, Brown-Green Circle, Priest Circle and so forth. All Circles hold council and also have other forms for meeting.

The word *council* refers to what is happening in the circle. The format includes creating a ritual container which contains a physical center, using a talking piece when speaking, grounding ourselves in The Three Tenets, and conforming to guidelines which clarify intention. In council, participants have expressed a willingness to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening.

We hold the intention of being present, spontaneous, and open. Council also expresses the communal commitment and intention to practice in this way. Some Councils are regularly scheduled, such as the Precepts Council, Residents Council or Sangha Council, and others are scheduled for particular programs or as the need arises.

Council practice may have therapeutic effects, but it is not therapy and is not convened with the intention to resolve anything, or necessarily to come to a particular resolution or consensus. Its potential is to cultivate the thoughtful expression of the individual's voice of experience, reflection, and wisdom, and it is an invitation for collective or communal wisdom to arise.

## 2. The Three Tenets

The Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemaker Order serve as the foundation for council practice at ZCLA. The Tenets are:

- **Not-knowing**, or giving up fixed ideas about ourselves and the universe. Not-knowing is being open to all that is arising. We set aside our knowing by releasing our biases and fixed positions.
- **Bearing Witness to the joy and suffering of the world.** When we shift to open awareness, we can listen deeply and completely to what is arising. In Council, this manifests as both deep listening and acute attention to the person who is speaking in the circle and in being deeply heard by others. It is full-body-sensory listening taking in the speaker without judgment, acknowledging and deeply accepting the many facets of a given situation.
- **Taking Action that arises from Not-knowing and Bearing Witness.** Action naturally arises from the state of Not-knowing and Bearing Witness. This action arises from setting aside self-referential bias, which allows for deeper identification with others. We cannot know what this action will be beforehand; it is not part of a preconceived agenda. We plunge into the whole messy situation at hand with a radically open heart.

## 3. Council and the Role of the Facilitator

### A. Planning the Council

The facilitators consider the purpose of Council. Examples are exploring a precept, exploring issues, open exploration of whatever is arising in the moment, interpersonal conflicts, or specific themes such as death, parents, race, environment, work practice, and pets. A planning session among the facilitators prior to the council might be in order.

### B. Setup of the Circle Before Participants Arrive

Co-facilitators meet to set up the seats in a circle and the ceremonial center. The center of the circle is set up with the ceremonial cloth, a trimmed candle, sometimes flowers, and the talking pieces. The talking pieces are selected from the Center's collection.

### C. Arrival of the Circle Participants

As participants arrive, we ask them to stand at their seats until everyone has arrived. This facilitates seats being added or removed as needed. When all participants have arrived, the facilitator invites everyone to be seated and checks to see that everyone is equally in

the circle, with no person sitting slightly in front of another or outside of the circle. It is very important that participants arrive on time so that the Council can start on time. Late arrivals weaken the council container.

## **D. Opening the Council**

The facilitator invite someone to come forward to light the candle and offer the Blessing of the Council, which is “May we open our hearts and awaken the bodhi mind together.” The facilitators introduce the talking pieces and the form of council being used. The facilitators announce a three- to five-minute period of zazen with one strike of the bell. At the end of the silent period, the bell is again rung once. The facilitator waits until the sound of the bell has receded.

## **E. Welcome and Introduction of the Facilitators**

The facilitators welcome everyone to the Council and introduce themselves.

## **F. Check-In Round**

The facilitators invite a brief check-in round by asking each participant to say their name and respond to a prompt. The check-in round starts with a volunteer and proceeds quickly around the circle. A talking piece is not used.

Examples of check-in prompts are:

- State a word expressing what’s alive for you now
- Specify three words, five words, one sentence, and so on about what’s up for you
- Tell us a color that you are today
- Give a “Weather report” — cloudy, heat wave, etcetera
- Make a sound that expresses \_\_\_\_\_
- Make a movement that shows \_\_\_\_\_

## **G. Introduce the Purpose of the Council**

Introduce the Purpose of the Council, if it has been predetermined. When the purpose has not been set, the facilitator invites themes that are alive for the participants.

## **H. Introduce the Witness and Explain Their Role**

Please see [Section 4: The Witness](#) for an explanation of this role.

## I. Introduce The Three Tenets

The facilitator introduces and/or summarizes The Three Tenets of council: Not-knowing, thereby giving up fixed ideas about ourselves and the universe; Bearing witness to the joy and suffering of the world; and Taking action that arises from Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness.

## J. The Seven Guidelines of Council for Participants

The facilitator talks about the guidelines of council. All participants share responsibility for the quality of the council experience. Participants should notice when they are deflecting their expectations for the council or their discomfort onto the facilitators. When the participants don't notice and voice their fears, the facilitator skillfully invites the participants to reflect on what's coming up for them.

### 1. Listening from the Heart

We listen with our full attention and with an open heart-mind. Listening from the heart does not mean never having opinions, responses, and reactions. Instead, we note them and return to deep listening to others. We do not let reactivity interfere with our listening.

Attentive listening to another helps another person to be present and to reach their truth more easily. We receive another's sharing as our own sharing. We wait for the talking piece (See **#8: The Talking Piece**), hold it for a few moments of silence in our hands, and check in with ourselves to see what is arising in the moment. We are also deeply listening to the silence between speakers.

When we listen from the heart, we are:

- Suspending reactions and judgments. (I don't know)
- Seeking understanding (rather than agreement)
- Accepting others as they are (rather than thinking they need fixing)
- Empathizing (rather than criticizing and judging)
- Staying centered (calming our monkey minds)
- Staying present (not running away and hiding)
- Honoring feelings (ours and others).
- Monitoring our own emotional reactivity (instead of constructing a response)
- Reading the field (noting the group energy and mood) (See **Section 5: More Council Components, Part A: Reading the Field** for more information.)

## **2. Speaking from the Heart**

We speak from our own experience. We trust our own expression.

We do not prepare what we are going to say. We pick up the talking piece, pause in silence to see what is arising, and plunge. We speak as honestly as we can without trying to project a certain image of our self or without worrying how we will be perceived. In speaking our personal story, we use “I” statements, being true to our own experience.

When we speak from the heart, we are:

- Using “I” statements (vs. using “you” and “we” statements and characterizing others’ thoughts and feelings)
- Telling our personal story (vs. philosophizing)
- Favoring experiences and feelings (vs. reciting facts and views of others)
- Sharing insights that arise during council (vs. sharing from memory)
- Cutting to the chase (vs. droning on and on)
- Being spontaneous (vs. preparing our sharing)
- Moving toward openness (vs. becoming withdrawn)

We refrain from cross talking. (See **#6: Refraining from Cross Talk.**)

## **3. Speaking Leanly**

We speak leanly and, at the same time, say what is important. We cut to the chase. We become aware of when we are rambling. Speaking leanly attends to the essence of our message. We remember that we are being deeply listened to, so we do not need to repeat ourselves. We also consider how many people are in the council and allow time for others to share. We make eye contact with others in the council.

## **4. Honoring Silence**

While we remember that our voice is important to the circle, we are also aware that silence itself speaks. When we hold the talking piece, we are encouraged to pause in silence before speaking. This pause creates a transition from the previous speaker. When we feel we have nothing to share, we are encouraged to plunge by picking up the talking piece and pausing in silence and seeing what may arise.

## **5. Speaking Spontaneously**

We do not prepare what we are going to say. When we focus on our own story while others are speaking, we are unable to give the speaker our full attention. When we

hold the talking piece, we pause in silence and then plunge, allowing our sharing to arise in the moment. Spontaneity encourages playfulness, authenticity, and the freedom to explore what is arising for ourselves moment by moment.

## **6. Refraining from Cross Talk**

Cross talk means commenting or responding to another person's sharing either directly or indirectly. We simply do not speak when someone else has the talking piece nor do we reference another person's sharing when it is our turn to speak.

Refraining from cross talk means:

- Not interrupting someone when they are speaking or address them when it is our turn to speak.
- Not referencing a comment someone else has made. Referencing another person's sharing can often hide a subtle agenda of aligning yourself with or distancing yourself from another person. This dynamic subtly undermines the open field of Council.
- Not commenting or responding to another person's sharing that includes the person's name. For example, "When I heard Joshu say ....., this made me think of ....."
- Not comparing, praising, one-upping, or disagreeing with another person's sharing even when not using their name. For example, Joshu has shared that his mother died. Then a participant might say without referencing Joshu, "When my mother died we did it this way ....."

## **7. Holding Confidentiality**

We practice confidentiality to build mutual respect and trust in the Sangha. Confidentiality allows free expression. The intention of confidentiality is held after Council is over. At the Open Palm School, we define confidentiality as follows:

"What is said in the circle stays in the circle. After the Council is over, we may discuss with others themes and insights that arose, but without attribution to any party. If you want to further discuss something said in council with the person who said it, first ask permission of the person. People are free to say, 'No,' and this response must be respected. We are not expected to speak about what we said in council after the council is over."

## **8. The Talking Piece**

We use a talking piece so that a speaker is known and recognized. We listen deeply when it is held by another. We speak or maintain silence when it is held by us. The

talking piece ensures that only one person is speaking at a time. Its use discourages crosstalk and continually orients us to the entire circle.

The facilitator selects the talking pieces to be used for a council. Each talking piece has a history which is introduced by the facilitator.

The talking piece also:

- Focuses the attention of circle participants.
- Signals a clear beginning and ending to a person's sharing.
- Assures that each speaker has enough time to complete what he/she has to say.
- Creates a pause between speakers during which the group can take in what has just been said.

Participants who are unable to retrieve the talking piece due to physical limitations may ask someone to retrieve it for them.

## **K. Checking Out and Closing**

Allow enough time to complete the closing by the agreed upon ending time. Fifteen minutes prior to the end time is a good guideline. A closing round allows each person to comment briefly on their experience of the council. The facilitator thanks everyone for participating, re-states the guideline of confidentiality, and initiates three-to-five minutes of zazen followed by the chanting of *The Four Vows*. An invitation is made for someone to extinguish the candle and dedicate the merits of the Council by saying, "I dedicate the merits of this Council to (name a purpose or group that extends beyond those in the circle)."

## **L. The Facilitator as Participant and Guardian of Council**

Ideally, council is facilitated by two Zen Center-trained facilitators. In addition to holding the Council's intentions and ritual, the facilitators are also participants who shift fluidly between these two roles. If necessary, a senior student may offer instruction when facilitators do not address a breach of council etiquette.

A facilitator also acts as guardian to bring the council back to intention when necessary. The facilitator pays attention to the circle's energies and observes the process of council. If needed, the facilitator uses the bell to signal everyone to pause. Then the facilitator rings the bell again and speaks to why the pause was called.

The facilitator or participant may name "the elephant in the room." or name a particular energy that may be arising. At this point, the facilitator addresses how to best serve the circle. For example, when circumstances or a sudden eruption of suppressed issues, feelings, or problems take over and seems to derail the council, the facilitator may decide to

go with it. The disruption is embraced and the facilitator guides the group toward the learning or opportunity hiding within the chaos. Alternatively, the facilitator may decide to bring the circle back to its original stated intention.

## **M. Forming a Prompt**

Forming a good question or prompt is part of the council facilitator's skill and art. While topics must be of interest and relevance to the whole group, a good question is one that participants feel they *can* respond to and one that they *will* respond to. Effective prompts are specific to the people who are present.

### **Guidelines for prompts:**

- Avoid yes or no questions.
- Evoke stories from the participants own experience.
- Avoid abstractions, intellectualizing and preaching.
- Are clear and grammatically uncomplicated.
- Open up the unpacking of a specific situation.

### **Examples of effective prompts are:**

- “ What is stirred up or alive for you right now or in relation to \_\_\_?”
- “ What are you cultivating as a practitioner?”
- “ How are you practicing with ... the five poisons, generosity, etc.?”
- “What comes up for you around .... e.g., race, sexuality, gender, death, et cetera.”
- “What's alive for you now around a current event or tragedy ... ”
- “What are your aspirations for yourself in the context of community...”
- “Tell about a time when you took care of someone ... ”

## **N. Summary of the Role of the Facilitator in Planning a Council**

1. Collaborate with the co-facilitator. A pre-planning session may be called for.
2. Set up the physical circle *before* participants arrive.
3. Open the council by:
  - Welcoming everyone.
  - Introducing the facilitators.
  - Sitting in silence for 3-5 minutes to settle, with one bell to begin and one bell to end.
  - Expressing the shared intention for the council.

- Explaining the guidelines for council and The Three Tenets.
  - Introducing the talking pieces.
  - Introducing the witness(es), if present.
  - Initiating a check-in round by inviting participants to say their names along with a response to a check-in prompt.
  - Stating the initial style of council, e.g., popcorn, going round.
4. While in Council, the facilitator:
    - Observes the group energies throughout the council.
    - Shifts fluidly between the roles of the facilitator and participant.
    - Serves as guardian of the circle.
  5. Calls for the check-out round closing.
  6. Takes down the set up and puts everything away.
  7. Debriefs with the co-facilitator.

## 4. The Witness

A council may include a witness. The witness sits outside of the circle and is introduced by the facilitator at the beginning. The role of the witness is to observe and maintain an eagle's eye-view of the group process and dynamic. When invited, the witness offers feedback on the group's process and dynamics as compared to commenting on content and subject matter or sharing one's opinion of outcomes. For example, a witness may comment on the shifts of the energetic field during the course of the council or the variety of sharing or the willingness of participants to go deeper or not, or the willingness to hold the space for the sharing of certain participants. The facilitator invites the witness to comment at the end of council and may also call for a witness comment at any time during the council.

## 5. More Council Components

### A. Reading the Field

*The following section is reproduced from the Center for Council's description of "Reading the Field."*

The practice of listening deeply includes listening to the collective heart (soul) of the circle. This is called "reading the field." The field is the emerging mind, heart, body, and spirit of the given circle in which we find ourselves.

The field of the circle is not simply the sum of the moods and energies of each individual, but rather the synergy of our joined hearts and minds. It is something entirely new and unique in the moment. In *practical terms*, reading the field means being aware of the mood and energy, the needs, intentions and overall progress of the circle as a whole, even as we are speaking ourselves or listening to others. We *attune* to the content of what is said, the feeling tone of the council, the physical movements and the energetic sense of the unspoken. This is NOT a call to analyze (or, worse, to psychoanalyze) the group individually or collectively; rather it is an ever present invitation simply to be aware of the ebbs and flows of the groups filed, along with everything else. This practice, of reading the filed, is the essence of witnessing. It is a challenge specific to council to be both participant and witness simultaneously, showing *who I am* in context of *who we are becoming*.

... From Joe Provisor, Founding Director of TOF'S Council in Schools initiative:

One technique for practicing reading the field is to have four students, one for each perspective... sit outside the periphery of the circle in the cardinal points. They do not participate in the council until the end, when they provide comments as to what they witnessed. We can divide the role of the witness into four skill areas: verbal, non-verbal, intentional, and energetic.

Ask designated students to each focus on one of these four. The witness to the "verbal" dynamics of the group, reports at the end of the council as to *what was said* and the group's apparent thematic focus. A witness to the "non-verbal" notices only the *body language* evident among and between the participants, the ways individuals move within their own space and how pairings, sub-groups, and the group as a whole relates spatially. A witness to the "intentional" content notices and comments on the degree to which *the group fulfilled its stated intentions*. (If the intention was to resolve a conflict or to create an action plan, to what degree were those intentions fulfilled?) The "energy" of a group is hard to quantify and describe, yet we know quite well when the energy is high or low, waxing or waning, heavy or light. The "energetic" witness uses a soft focus on the center of the council most of the time and then reports on the feelings he or she got involving *the energy flow in the group*. Sometimes this hard to define area is reported as light and darkness, heat or coldness, pressure, colors, images. Through a synthesis of the four perspectives, students apprehend the heart of what is enacted by the group.

Whether we are conscious of this or not, this field exerts a powerful force on what we think, feel, sense and on the choices we make, large and small. The more aware we can be of the soul our emerging community, the more compassionate and effective we become as facilitators and as individuals. This is true of life in general. The following is a handy memory tool for staying mindfully aware of the group's FIELD:

**F** = feelings

**I** = intentions

- E = energy
- L = language (verbal and body)
- D = destiny (where we are evolving together).

## **B. The Shadow**

The term Shadow is used to refer to everything of which a person and/or the group is not fully conscious. Because the individual and the group tend to reject or remain ignorant of the least desirable aspects of themselves, the shadow is largely negative, although not always. The shadow can be sensed or even identified by asking guiding questions along these lines:

- What topic is the group avoiding?
- What topic is taboo?
- Is someone being scapegoated or avoided?
- What are group members complaining about?
- What topic gives rise to group anger? to group silence? to group discomfort?

## **C. “Turning into the Skid”**

From the Center for Council Handbook:

When circumstances or a sudden eruption of suppressed issues, feelings, or problems take over and derails the planned agenda, *go with it*. Do not deny or pretend that this isn't happening, which is often our instinctive response. Instead, embrace the disruption and lead the group toward the learning or opportunity hiding within the chaos. This is known as “turning into the skid” — paradoxically, the best way to avoid an accident when a vehicle seems to be skidding out of control. Good for facilitators to develop comfort with this and model, but may be initiated or practiced by any and all participants.

## **6. Styles of Council**

The circle is the foundational style. Other styles of council are:

### **Basic Council**

The talking piece goes around the circle, clockwise or counter-clockwise. The original talking piece may be returned at any time to the center and another chosen. This style assures that everyone's voice is heard. It is used for opening and closing the council. It can also be used to get a sense of what's alive in the group.

## **Popcorn Council**

The talking piece is in the center of the circle. A participant picks up the talking piece when moved to do so and returns it to the center after speaking. The next speaker waits before picking up the talking piece until the previous speaker has returned to his or her seat. This style is useful for discovering topics, weaving images or perspectives together, developing the collective story or going deeply into specific issues.

## **Spiral Council**

Four to six seats (or more depending on the size of the group) form an inner circle around the talking pieces. Participants can flow from the outer circle into the inner circle and back again. This leaves the inner circle to be witnessed by the outer circle. One “turn” in the inner circle involves both speaking and listening. After speaking, the participant listens to the next person before returning to the outer circle. Another person from the outer circle then takes the empty seat before speaking continues. This style is used for particular themes, hot topics, conflict exploration, and/or large groups.

## **Fishbowl Council**

Two or more seats form an inner circle around the talking pieces. The participants who sit in the inner circle have been asked or have requested to sit there. The people seated in the outer circle serve as witnesses. The talking piece is used by the participants in the inner circle. The outer circle participants are invited to offer witness comments at the end. This style is useful for large groups, when time is short, for “hot” topics, and for encouraging feedback from many witnesses who are holding different points of view.

## **Response Council**

In this council style, a participant of the circle may ask for a response from others while they hold the piece. An example would be a participant in an ongoing circle where trust has been developed who is requesting feedback from the participants in the circle.

## **Dyadic Council**

Two people sit in council and pass the talking piece between them, working on an issue, exploring a vision, or enhancing a relationship. This may be useful for two friends, business partners, sangha siblings, couples, lovers, or a parent and child. In situations where the two participants are in conflict, a person may be invited to witness and/or facilitate (Triad Council).

## 7. Example of a Council Sequence

The ZCLA Day of Reflection Precept Council (1.5 hours)

1. Form the Circle.
2. Welcome everyone.
3. Introduce yourself and the co-facilitator.
4. You may sit in silence for 3-5 minutes to settle, with one bell to begin and one bell to end.
5. State The Three Tenets.
6. State the guidelines for Council.
7. Invite someone to light the candle.
8. Give the Blessing prompt.
9. Begin the check-in round.
10. Introduce and re-read the precept (brief).
11. Begin the round — state the style as either popcorn or basic.
12. Some things to note during the Council sharing:
  - Track the time
  - Ask people to speak up more loudly, if necessary
  - Remind people to pause between sharing, as appropriate
  - Remind people to give everyone a chance to share before sharing a second time, as appropriate
13. Call for the check-out round about fifteen minutes before the end time.
14. Begin the check-out round with a minute of silence.
15. Hand out the Dedication of Merit and recite.
16. Chant The Four Bodhisattva Vows or sing the Heart Song.
17. Invite someone to extinguish the candle.
18. Close the Circle by restating the confidentiality intention.
19. Thank everyone for participating.
20. Disassemble the circle. Leave no trace in the room.
21. Debrief with the co-facilitator.

## 8. Gathas and Songs

### Council Blessing

*May we open our hearts and awaken the bodhi mind together.*

*May the practice of Council benefit all beings. May we each have the chance to speak, may we each feel heard, and may we listen well.*

(You may also create your own blessings. It is helpful to begin a blessing with the phrase “May we...” or “Let us....”)

### Dedication of Merit

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have committed myself to this Day of Reflection. May the merits of this practice be extended to all those who dedicate their lives to the practice of peace and to all those who suffer from the oppression of my own greed, anger, and ignorance. I wish to transform the passions that afflict me and to realize and actualize the Buddha Way.

I have taken refuge in the Buddha, I have taken refuge in the Dharma, I have taken refuge in the Sangha. (3x)

### The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows (3x)

Numberless beings, I vow to serve them.  
Inexhaustible delusions, I vow to end them.  
Boundless dharmas, I vow to practice them.  
Unsurpassable Buddha Way, I vow to embody it.

### Gatha of Atonement (3x)

All karma ever committed by me since of old.  
Due to my beginning-less greed, hatred, lust, envy, and delusion.  
Born of my actions, speech, and thought.  
Now I atone for it all.

### Gatha on Opening the Sutra (1x)

The Dharma, incomparable profound and infinitely subtle,  
Is always encountered, but rarely perceived, even in millions of ages.  
Now we see it, hear it, receive and maintain it.  
May we completely realize the Tathagata’s true meaning.

## Hear My Voice

by Patricia Shingetsu Guzy. Sing to the tune of the Welsh folk song “All Through the Night.”

Walk your way with loving-kindness.

Hear your voice.

In the silence, through the madness.

Hear your voice.

Don't be moved when thunder gathers.

Be the space that holds it all.

Let us share the heart that's tender.

Hear your voice.

## 9. Bodhisattvas and The Three Tenets

A bodhisattva, literally an awakened (bodhi) sentient being (sattva), is the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. A bodhisattva raises the great vow to work tirelessly for the awakening of all beings, even though, as the Diamond Sutra points out, she sees that there are no beings to be liberated. The bodhisattva's practice is to continually wake up to the reality of life and experience and act from life's intimate unity. Due to this underlying unity of life, you cannot liberate yourself apart from others, for it is in the liberating of others that you are liberated, too.

Many years ago in the Bodhi Tree Bookstore, I found a used copy of a book by the pioneer Zen Master Nyogen Senzaki Sensei. In his beautiful handwriting, Senzaki Sensei had inscribed a dedication which read: “Your gladness is my gladness, I have no other gladness than this.” Or, as Maezumi Roshi often said, “My life exists because of your life; my life depends on your life.” In recognition of this fact, a bodhisattva works tirelessly for the welfare of all. This work is not approached with a sense of overbearing responsibility or self-grandiosity but rather a sense of joy, of cheerfulness. In the midst of suffering beings, the bodhisattva connects with the profound joy of serving others.

In Mahayana Buddhism, there are several major bodhisattvas, such as Great Non-dual Wisdom Manjushri, Great Compassion Avalokiteshvara, Great Action Samantabhadra, and Great Vow Ksitigarbha. The bodhisattvas are not historical people, but archetypal energies common to each and every one of us. As Zen ancestor Tenkei Denson Zenji said, “Avalokiteshvara is your name.” These bodhisattva names are your names. The purpose of practice is to awaken these energies and qualities within yourself. Your capacity to embody these energies and the unique characteristics of each archetype expands as you practice. In this way, you are constantly growing and changing, contracting and expanding—participating in a continual dance of intimate arising and vanishing.

How can you work with these energies in a very practical way and learn to embody them on the spot? To explore this question, let us look at the Three Tenets: Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Taking Action. The Three Tenets can be seen as a recasting of the Three Pure

Precepts, which are part of the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts. The first Pure Precept, Do No Evil, is recast as Not-Knowing; the second, Do Good, is recast as Bearing Witness; and the third, Do Good for Others, is recast as Taking Action.

When practicing with the first Tenet of Not-Knowing, the non-dual wisdom energy of Manjushri Bodhisattva is awakened. Manjushri, the central figure of the zendo, is always depicted holding a sword that is used to cut through delusions. So the practice of wielding Manjushri's sword is to cut through your knowing—your concepts, ideas, beliefs, and opinions.

Letting go of your delusions is the first step. You release all your knowing by setting knowing aside, so that you remain open to all that is arising. The sword cuts through and you empty out as completely as you can. There is no hesitation here—it is simply a flash of openness; a moment of releasing your fixed ideas about any person, any idea, any position. You simply stop. In doing so, you realign yourself with the essential nature of life: no position, no self. You learn to practice this releasing instantaneously, in the snap of the fingers or the blink of an eye.

What happens when you stop your knowing? From experience you know that when you stop, you become receptive. You have released everything and can actually take in whatever is happening. It only takes a moment to arouse Manjushri's wisdom. Now you have a chance to understand another, to connect with the joy and suffering of another and come into harmony with another person or situation.

Once you have stopped, the second Tenet of Bearing Witness manifests. In Bearing Witness, Avalokiteshvara's Great Compassion is awakened through the embodiment of deep listening. The bottom line here is caring—caring enough to listen completely to what is manifesting right here, right now: pain, fear, despair, sadness, joy, confusion, serenity, boredom. This is full-body listening: you listen with your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. Bearing witness recognizes the intimate connectedness of life. In order to bear witness, you practice listening without judgment. The key quality is non-judging—not evaluating or picking and choosing or giving in to your fixed positions. You choose being open to the vividness of life arising anew in each moment. You are actively stopping, and accepting without judgment, whatever is arising. You acknowledge and deeply accept the multitude of facets of any given situation. In this way, you are in intimate relationship to the joys and suffering of another.

The quality of Bearing Witness or non-judging has two important characteristics. These characteristics are embodied in Kanzeon and Kanjizai, two Japanese Buddhist names for Avalokiteshvara (Sanskrit). As Kanzeon, the “One who Hears the Cries of the World,” you practice connecting and staying close to the suffering of others. As Kanjizai, the “One who Settles in the Self,” you remain grounded in not-knowing.

In Bearing Witness, you identify completely with another. Your suffering is my suffering; my suffering is your suffering—in this way, little by little, you enlarge your capacity to attend to the needs of the world. This is not a self-centered concern, for it is obvious that one cannot fit something so vast into the small container of self-concern. Rather, this is an experience of

forgetting the self—something vast is being awakened within yourself. You are getting out of the way and settling into the situation at hand.

Action naturally arises from Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness. This is the action of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. It is called a loving or healing action because not-knowing and bearing witness without bias lead to love. You have identified with another. Bearing witness breaks the heart open to love, and when there is love, action naturally arises. You simply must do something. You cannot know what this action will be by simply thinking about what to do in a given situation. You must plunge into the whole messy situation at hand.

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (J. Jizo) is the energy of never turning away. The practice here is to develop stability—don't wobble! As you practice the Three Tenets, your capacity to remain present to suffering expands. And in remaining present, the recognition grows that you are, in fact, indispensable to others. This is not a self-centered activity, but rather a giving over of yourself to the Great Vows of the bodhisattvas, which are to save and serve all beings without exceptions. The vows fulfill us; the vows awaken us; the vows save us.

By Roshi Wendy Egyoku Nakao. Revised 2018

## 10. Resources on Council

Two excellent starting places are:

**The Way of Council** by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, Bramble Books, 2nd edition, 2009. This is the seminal book on Council.

**The Center for Council** website has excellent information on Council, including workshops. <https://www.centerforcouncil.org/>

These resources may also be helpful:

**Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture**, by Christina Baldwin, Bantam, revised edition, 1998.

**The Ceremonial Circle: Practice, Ritual, and Renewal for Personal and Community Healing** by Sedonia Cahill and Joshua Halpern, Harpercollins, 1992.

**The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair** by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010.

**Dreaming the Council Ways: True Native Teachings from the Red Lodge** by Ohkey Forest Simine. Red Wheel / Weiser, 2009.

**The Generativity of Not Knowing**, a talk by Jared Seide on the modern practice of council, given at Zen Life & Meditation Center, Chicago. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZki-VBzSJ9o> (41 min), posted June 11, 2017.

**The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking** (Little Books of Justice and Peacebuilding), by Kay Pranis, Good Books, 2005.

*May the practice of Council benefit all beings.*