

# ZCLA Protocol for Former Prisoners

## Introduction

Since its founding in 1967 by the Ven. Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Zen Center of Los Angeles/Buddha Essence Temple has provided the teachings and practice of Zen Buddhism to all who come and go through its temple gate.

Our mission is to know the Self, maintain the precepts, and serve others. We serve by providing the teaching, training, and transmission of Zen Buddhism. Our vision is an enlightened world in which suffering is transcended, all beings live in harmony, everyone has enough, deep wisdom is realized, and compassion flows unhindered.

We affirm our intention to honor diversity and actively welcome all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background.

We affirm the undying Buddha-nature of all beings. However, living in the relative world, we also recognize that each person who comes to ZCLA comes with a past that must be considered when he or she wants to participate in an intentional community that includes residents, families and children. Our practice emphasizes shared stewardship and the collective awakening of all beings practicing together. Our experience tells us that ignorance and a failure to meet each individual exactly where they are can lead to great suffering, both for the individual and for the Sangha.

These issues can be particularly magnified in situations where a former prisoner<sup>1</sup> seeks to become a Sangha member and to deepen his or her Buddhist practice. In an attempt to create an environment that supports the practice of all Sangha members together, we have established the following protocol that is intended to balance both the intent of the sincere practitioner to participate in the ZCLA Sangha as well as the Sangha's desire to bring a new member who is a former prisoner into the community in a way that promotes the well-being of all involved.

---

<sup>1</sup> This policy is intended to cover people who were formerly convicted and incarcerated. Because of the state's policy of realignment, some people who are convicted of criminal violations are housed in jails, rather than prisons. For simplicity, all people who were previously convicted of violating the criminal laws and subject to incarceration are referred to as "former prisoners," regardless of whether they were housed in prison facilities or elsewhere.

## Process

This protocol outlines the entry process into practice and membership at ZCLA for known former prisoners who are interested in practicing at ZCLA. This process speaks most directly to those former prisoners known to the Zen Center's Sangha from the work of Zen Center Prison Chaplains, although it is possible that people who do not come through this route will also apply.

If a former prisoner is not known to us and does not reveal that he or she was incarcerated, their incarceration will remain unknown to us, just as it is now. If and when this information becomes known, it becomes grounds for possible loss of access and/or membership, depending on the circumstances.

The process is the following:

1. Upon release from prison/jail and after expressing interest, a former prisoner will be paired with one, possibly two, ZCLA Mentor[s]. These Mentor[s] will be appointed by the Abbot or her designee. The Abbot will notify the Board of this development.
2. Upon request by the former prisoner, the Mentor[s] will help the former prisoner arrange a first visit to ZCLA.
3. If there is continued interest by the former prisoner, the Mentor[s] will help the former prisoner negotiate the arrangements and conditions of supervised visits to ZCLA. These arrangements will be made with the consent of the Abbot or her designee.
4. After a former prisoner has been out of prison/jail for a period of time and has demonstrable evidence of sober and stabilized living, the person may submit an application for membership, if membership is desired. If membership is not desired but the person wishes to continue to practice at ZCLA, the Mentor will make a recommendation to the Membership Steward and Abbot as to how the person may continue.
5. The membership application is available through the ZCLA office. The completed application will be submitted to the Membership Steward, who will, in consultation with the Mentor and the Abbot (or her designee) review the application. A standard criminal background check by a certified agency will be conducted if it is deemed necessary.

6. Depending on the situation and on a case-by-case basis, the areas of consideration to help assess the applicant may include, among other things:
  - a. Being free from substance abuse;
  - b. Meeting the terms of probation or parole; and
  - c. Any other factors that are felt to be appropriate based on the particular facts and circumstances of the application.
7. After reviewing and accepting the membership application, the applicant is then invited to an interview with the Abbot, Membership Steward and a third person to be selected by the Abbot.
8. At this juncture, one of two outcomes may unfold: a favorable interview or an unfavorable one. In either case, a written response will be given to the applicant.
  - a. **If the interview is favorable**, the Membership Steward, in consultation with other members of the interview committee, will draw up a membership plan, the points of which will address, but may not be limited to, the following:
    - i. The length of a probationary period and a schedule of the review process, if any;
    - ii. Any restrictions on the applicant's access to the Center;
    - iii. The Mentor[s] who will provide orientation to ZCLA and help facilitate the applicant's integration into ZCLA. Mentors may avail themselves of the guidelines for dharma buddies;
    - iv. The frequency of the applicant's meetings with the Mentor[s]; and
    - v. A statement as to whether it is necessary, in the particular case at hand, for the applicant's background to be disclosed to others and to whom.

If the applicant accepts the conditions set forth in the membership plan, then he or she will become a ZCLA Member under the terms and conditions set forth therein.

- b. **If the interview is not favorable**, the Membership Steward will communicate the feedback to the applicant. If potential for future membership exists, the applicant will be informed of what would be required before the application could move forward.
9. The Board of Directors will be notified by the Membership Steward as to whether a favorable or unfavorable decision was made on any application.

**This protocol may be amended as deemed necessary.** The Abbot and Board will oversee amendments to this protocol. Furthermore, in any individual case, the Abbot and the Board may, at their sole discretion, adopt different procedures for the application and consideration process of any former prisoner.

Approved by the ZCLA Board of Directors  
July 14, 2013

END