Water Wheel

Being one with all Buddhas, I turn the water wheel of compassion.
—Gate of Sweet Nectar

Right Speech

by Katherine Daiki Senshin Griffith

Sometimes a statement is like a lion crouching on the ground; sometimes a statement is like a diamond sword. Sometimes a statement silences everyone; sometimes a statement goes along with the waves.
-From the Introduction to Blue Cliff Case #8

There is so much one can say about Right Speech.

But "Baba wawa" – is there anything said or not?[1]

Right Speech is one of the prongs of the Eightfold Path. Following Right View and Right Intention, it leads Right Action and Right Livelihood in the division of moral discipline. According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha taught that Right Speech should not be deceptive, slanderous or discordant, harsh or abusive, nor indulging in idle chatter or gossip. Instead, one following the Path that relieves suffering should speak truthfully, with goodwill, using language that is harmonious and beneficial.

A majority of the Ten Grave Precepts deal with speech: Don't Lie, Don't Speak Ill of Others, Don't Blame Others, Don't Speak Ill of the Three Treasures, and Don't Be Angry. Harmful speech can also lead to breaking the other Precepts of Not Killing, Not Stealing, Not Misusing Sex, Not Getting Intoxicated, and Not Being Stingy. No doubt about it, speech has enormous power.

Communication is a key component of being a human. It's what ties us together, turns us from being isolated individuals to co-members of a society. In the movie *Castaway*, the sole survivor on a deserted island so craves connection, he befriends and talks to a volleyball he names Wilson. As members of various communities, we humans have made several agreements that sound like what Buddha emphasized in Right Speech: tell the truth, don't slander, speak to benefit not to harm.

Now, there are more modes and platforms for conveying speech than ever, coming at us from all over the world via: books, newspapers, magazines, blogs, radio/TV/film/stage, texts, emails, social media, billboards, skywriting, bullhorns, megaphones, and microphones. It can convey key news and breakthroughs that can change minds and start revolutions. But much of it is vacuous chatter or endless sales pitching.

And lies out the wazoo. So much of what is said is factually not true. But an even greater transgression is that our words don't reflect our true nature. We talk to each other as if we weren't connected. With the simple click, hateful bullying can radiate out to multitudes. This has contributed to the suicide rates among U.S. adolescents doubling in the last 10 years.

And that doesn't even include the endless speech inside our heads. All the things we are telling ourselves—are they truthful, harmonious, beneficial and non-slanderous? To not realize our true nature and regard ourselves and others as unworthy or in a narrow box is a Great Slander.

Our thoughts bleed into speech, which is often thought-less. How much of what we say comes out of our conditioning, inherited tropes, or uninvestigated hearsay? When we speak are we protecting just ourselves? When we apologize, is it with true concern for the other and acknowledgment of the consequences from our actions?

(Continued on page 2)

[1]From *Song of the Jewel Awareness.*

INSIDE THIS ISSUE ... *and more!*

RIGHT SPEECH *(Continued from page 1)*

Or is it to get off the hook? How wedded are we to being right, to having the last say? Even in silence, we speak. Our faces and body language say so much.

When I was a child, I got in trouble a lot for talking out of turn in class. The nuns would make me miss recess to write out words (ironically) from the dictionary. I remember not even knowing what I had done wrong. In fourth grade, I decided to be a silent person. I would count my words and see how few I could say each day. Answering questions in class did not count. Answering questions my father asked me on the way to school did. So, I would just reply in monosyllabic answers. He was the only one who noticed the change and teased me with the moniker Silent Sam. I never made it past lunch and the whole enterprise did not last very long and I was back to being Chatty Kathy. Watching everything I said was exhausting.

Yet the Buddha asks us to watch what we say. ZCLA Guidelines for Right Speech ask: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it beneficial? Is it necessary? Is it the right time?

The complimentary practice to Right Speech is Deep Listening. How can we possibly know what's appropriate if we're so busy speaking? We are often given the instruction to hear others' sharing as our own. Then determine what is it that we really need to say? What is the ingredient that's missing in the conversation? Might it sometimes be silence? Who in the room hasn't yet spoken? I've noticed sometimes when people repeat themselves, it's not because their point hasn't been made but because all their feelings haven't been released. Maybe that's why songs have many verses and repeated choruses.

To Deeply Listen, sometimes we need to turn off our many devices with their endless incoming barrage. We might also consider which of the modes is best suited to each communication we send out: an email for sharing lengthy information, a text to say you're running late, a phone call to show you care, an in-person meeting for in-depth conversations, a poetic work of art for conveying a deeper truth, a bell rung for silence in the zendo.

Our speech reflects our thoughts. That's why Right View is so key. Before we open our mouths, we should see as is. See the truths of impermanence, interconnection, suffering and the emptiness of self.

From this vantage point, we can find for ourselves:

The meaning is not in the words,
Yet it responds to the inquiring impulse.

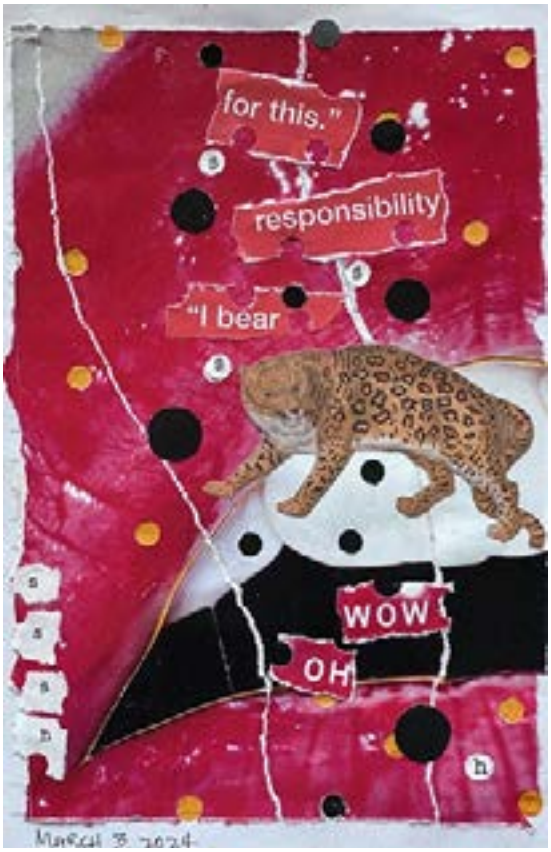
[And…] *Although it is not fabricated*
It is not without speech.[1]

With Right View, we can raise our bodhicitta, the thought of awakening ourselves and others and contributing to a harmonious world, while remembering what it says in the *Diamond Sutra*:

> *"Subhuti, … what do you think? Does a bodhisattva create any harmonious buddha fields?" "No, World-Honored One, he does not. Why? Because to create a harmonious buddha field is not to create a harmonious buddha field, and therefore it is known as creating a harmonious buddha field."*
>
> *"So, Subhuti, all bodhisattvas should develop a pure, lucid mind that doesn't depend upon sight, sound, touch, flavor, smell, or any thought that arises in it. A bodhisattva should develop a mind that functions freely, without depending on anything whatsoever."*

Our aspiration in Zen is to be a fully functioning human, able to use everything for the benefit of all. To use ALIVE words. Then our speech can be as ready as a crouching lion, sharp as a diamond sword, harmonious with rollicking waves. It might be a warm hello, an encouraging word, a question needing to be asked, the answer to a problem, a story that must be told, a demand for harm to stop, a joke that releases tension. Or it might just be the Great Silence that hears.

Sensei Senshin is the ZCLA Head Teacher.



Paper collage by Egyoku Nakao, 5-3/8 x 8-1/2 inches

Living to the Beat of a New Rhythm

by Darla Myoho Fjeld

Master Kyogen said, "It's like a man up a tree, hanging from a branch by his mouth; his hands cannot grasp a branch, his feet won't reach a bough. Suppose there is another man under the tree who asks him, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the west? If he does not respond, he goes against the wish of the questioner. If he answers, he will lose his life. At such a time, how should he respond?
-Case 5, Gateless Gate – Kyogen's Man up a Tree

Who is this Master Kyogen? His full name was Kyogen Chikan and he was a disciple of Master Isan Reiyu. Master Kyogen was highly educated, well-read in the sutras and commentaries and generally intelligent. As we all know, this kind of intelligence can be a hindrance to deep realization. Fortunately, Kyogen's teacher, Master Isan in his wisdom, knew to provide Kyogen with a koan to shake him out of this state of mind. Master Isan asks him: "What's your essential face before your father and mother were born?" Master Kyogen was dumbfounded and could say nothing. Instead he excused himself and ran back to his room to consult the sutras for an answer that wouldn't make him look stupid. He found none and came back to Master Isan and said, "I don't know the answer." I'm sure we can all relate to poor Kyogen.

It came to Kyogen that an empty stomach will not be satisfied with pictures of food and he burned all of his sutras and made a vow to find peace of mind through work at a hermitage. While there, he was sweeping up leaves and a little pebble bounced off of his broom and hit a bamboo tree—Kyogen hearing the sound that it made experienced a deep realization of his true nature and was filled with a wonderful joy. The first line of the verse that he composed when this happened was: "One striking sound, and I have forgotten all I knew." This is a great description of Not-Knowing—the first of our Three Tenets.

So this is the Master Kyogen that gives us the example of a man up a tree with his mouth holding onto a branch. He drew on his own experience of being speechless—actionless—a deer in the headlights. How many of us are living our lives with our mouths clinging to the branch of a tree? What is being represented here? What are we clinging to that keeps us from living full vivacious lives? Are we afraid of falling? Are we afraid of death? Can we see what hinders us?

Four years ago, on May 25, 2020, we witnessed a seasoned police officer murder George Floyd with the help of three other officers, none of whom, came to the aid of Mr. Floyd even though they watched the murder up close. There can be no doubt that they could have spoken up—they could have taken hold of their boss's arm to stop him, but none of them did. They just stood by while their boss murdered a human being. It took eight minutes and 15 seconds, a minute and 20 seconds of which occurred after Mr. Floyd was unconscious and paramedics were at the scene. How long does it take for us to respond? Are we too attached to our own egos that we are blinded to what is going on right in front of our noses? What would you do to save a life? Would you open your mouth and fall away from your clinging? Are we too timid to scream, "Stop it!"?

Zazen helps us to live to the beat of a new rhythm, because practicing Zazen allows us to free ourselves from our karma-conditioned selves. This is a radical practice whereby we are liberated from selfishness and othering. The new rhythm that we live when we do this starts with pausing in Not-Knowing. This is not the same thing as hesitating to think things out—to reason about all the possible results of our actions and speech—to do this would be to rely on our dualism-creating brains. In the midst of this Not-Knowing that we strengthen in our Zazen practice, we Bear Witness to what is actually happening—no narratives—no stories—no judgments—no "I'm right and you're wrongs"—we simply witness the ingredients of a situation or an encounter. And from this place of Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness to the facts, we let go of the branch and do something or say something or don't do anything or don't say anything.

The Three Tenets of Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness and Acting are not sequential—all three are happening simultaneously in the brief pause—the length of the pause varies in duration depending on the situation—sometimes it lasts seconds—sometimes hours or days or years. Eight minutes and 15 seconds was way too long of a pause for those officers that stood by watching their boss kill a human being who was unconscious and no threat to anyone. What stopped them from acting? Why did their mouths continue to cling to that branch?

When we begin to live to the beat of this new matter of fact rhythm, we allow the ingredients of our lives to replace our opinions, concepts, stories and thoughts—in fact, life itself becomes our new brain. In Zen we think

(Continued on page 4)

LIVING TO THE BEAT *(Continued from page 3)*

from a different place than our dualism-making brains. If the man up a tree had done this, surely he would have let go of the branch and helped a brother out. The same would be true of Nansen's monks in Case 14 of the Gateless Gate when Nansen held up a cat and told his monks to say a word or he would cut the cat in two. They were all silent and the cat died. Had they been living to the beat of the new rhythm, they could have simply said, "Stop it—I'll take the cat outside and give her something to eat."

To get here, we must move beyond our dualistic, fearful brains. This is what it means to let go of the branch and free fall into our lives. This is to drop into Wisdom — Avalokiteshvara doing deep prajna paramita manifests as Kanzeon Bodhisattva doing deep compassion. Wisdom and Compassion are two sides of the same coin and each of us is this coin.

"When we begin to live to the beat of this new matter of fact rhythm, we allow the ingredients of our lives to replace our opinions, concepts, stories and thoughts—in fact, life itself becomes our new brain."

Koan practice helps us to get to this place of Wisdom/Compassion, because it is not possible to solve the case with thought and reasoning, only by letting go of dualistic thinking.

Kyogen's branch represents the self that we cling to—when we drop the hindrance of the self, we are freed to respond to the cries and joys of the world.

When we let go of the branch, we begin to live more simply and straightforwardly, because we are no longer caught up in whatever blah, blah, blah occupies most people with pulses. To let go, we must have courage to jump in and join emerging life—to be part of that emergence. We must have the courage to emerge within the flow of life.

A good place to practice this is council. In council we speak from the heart and say what needs to be said. We try to do this without saying anything extra. We bear witness to others by listening from our caring hearts. Council is a great way to work with self-consciousness because we try to speak spontaneously and not plan what we're going to say, which would hinder our listening to what others are saying. In council, we allow ourselves as a group to emerge together.

Let's look at Mumon's Commentary:

Even if your eloquence flows like a river, it is of no use. Even if you can expound the whole body of the sutras, it is of no avail. If you can respond to it fittingly, you will give life to those who have been dead, and put to death those who have been alive. If, however, you are unable to do this, wait for Maitreya to come and ask him.

Eloquence and rhetoric and sharing your thoughts on the sutras and books can be interesting, but none of this will save a life. Communicating ideas and concepts is not the same thing as the essential fact. The only way to get this is to let go of the branch and commit to fully engaging life with your whole being—no hesitation—plunge right in. When we do this, we affect every other being with our loving action—giving life and taking it away according to the circumstances. Koun Yamada Roshi, explains this as: "Responding to the problem means to grasp the fact by direct experience. To bring the dead to life means to … awaken them to their essential life. By putting the living to death, … means killing your illusions and cutting through all your conceptual thinking." In this context, waiting for Maitreya means that if you keep being attached to ideas and concepts—if you keep holding onto the branch, you will never see who you really are.

And Mumon's Verse:

Kyogen is really absurd,
His perversity knows no bounds;
He stops up the monks' mouths,
Making his whole body into the glaring eyes of a demon.

I challenge you to open your mouth, let go of the branch, and respond.

Sensei Myoho is a priest, the Temple Development Steward, and is on the Teachers' Circle.

Corner of Disorder

Drawing by Mats Borges. (Mats is a practicing resident at ZCLA.)

Council Beginnings

by Wendy Egyoku Nakao

During ZCLA's early years, the phrase "Zen practice" meant zazen in the zendo, samu in service of ZCLA, and koans in face-to-face with Maezumi Roshi and his successors. We grew strong in samadhi, had a narrow understanding of practice, and were unskilled in communication and community. By the time of Maezumi Roshi's passing in 1995, we—along with all other pioneer Zen communities—were as dysfunctional a community as one might expect.[1]

In those early years, we were told not to speak about dokusan (face-to-face), nor encouraged to speak about our practice with each other. While Sangha members could be supportive, gossip, unskillful speech, and triangulation abounded in the large ZCLA residential staff and community. We had not yet coalesced into a sangha. What is sangha and what does it take to become one? What are the skillful practices that will develop this treasure? These are some of the questions that awaited our attention in the years ahead.

Five months after Maezumi Roshi's passing, I moved to Yonkers, NY, to work with Roshi Bernie Glassman, both as a student completing formal study and attending to matters extant from Maezumi Roshi's life. At this time, Roshi Bernie was pivoting from the Zen Community of New York to the Greyston Bakery and Foundation. Even so, a few of us gathered for zazen on Sunday mornings at the old pre-Civil War building on Park Avenue. One morning, I invited everyone to sit in a circle to share what was up for them in the breakup of their community. In retrospect, these were my first forays into convening circles. These first circles caused me to realize that intentional spaces for listening could be important portals for Zen communities.

Upon my return to ZCLA in the Spring of 1997, I experimented with circles as a practice and later as an organizational model. We were strong at facing the wall and facing the teacher; we were weak in interfacing with each other. Most of the Zen groups that began way back in the day had similar dynamics; many still do. At the time of my return, the organization and community of ZCLA had collapsed following the passing of its Founder and the subsequent upheaval caused by the then Resident Teacher. Among the many experiments that we undertook, calling people into circles to listen to each other was a major one. It may seem commonplace and obvious today; however, at that time, this form of horizontal practice in a Zen center was innovative and, like many innovations, upsetting to people who claimed that "It was not Zen." Zen practice was identified with hierarchy; the horizontal had no legitimacy among practitioners and teachers.

Sitting in a circle is a very old form, approximately 5,000 years old. It seems most natural to Indigenous peoples and women. Circle forms denote equality and inclusion. The Japanese "enso" ("circular form") symbolizes non-duality. The enso is an irregular circle usually with a gap, reminding us to be aware lest the circle itself becomes a means of exclusion and inequality. Although there are roles taken up by people in circle practice, these roles change often and are not linked to authority, domination, or power. Circle practice aims for an equal voice for everyone present—everyone is invited to speak their truth and to be heard by others, to listen to themselves and to the truth of others. Inherent to a Zen circle is the principle that everyone is a buddha and, all together, we are the collective buddha. Even as an idea, this is a stretch for most people in our severely fractured society.

In Zen Centers, which have come to us as patriarchial vertical hierarchies, introducing the horizontal aspects forces us to examine the very internal and external structures upon which our spiritual lives are built. The vertical top-down dimensions are deeply internalized; the horizontal side-by-side devalued and suppressed. Simplistic as this statement is, can we explore the intersection of our own internal vertical authority and horizontal inclusivity as a liberation? It's a daunting undertaking. How can I stand in my own authority and include yours as well?

In August of 1997, the Zen Center invited Jack Zimmerman and Gigi Coyle of the Ojai Foundation to introduce us to Council practice, which is held in a circle. Jack and Gigi were at the forefront of engaging Council outside of Indigenous communities.[2] They spent a weekend at our community, with Roshi Bernie and Roshi Jishu Holmes in attendance. We learned council by practicing it together for several days in the Buddha Hall. Jack and Gigi were also exploring, discovering, and learning. Their advice to us after the weekend: just keep practicing council—keep listening, keep learning, keep discerning.

(Continued on page 11)

[1] *Today, we are still in the early years of formation of Zen in the West. Scholars say it took 1,000 years before Zen in China took on the characteristics of what we know as Chinese Zen.*

[2] *In recent years, Jared Oshin Seide of the Center for Council, has provided Coucil training at ZCLA.*

DANA BOOKLET

January 1, 2023 – December 31, 2023

Dear Sangha and Friends of ZCLA,

When we realize the inter-beings that we all are, a great stirring arises in us to generously serve others. Each year, the Zen Center relies on donations to the Dharma Training Fund, the Annual Fund and other funds as needed. There are also sixty donors who have joined the Legacy Circle and have promised to remember ZCLA in the form of future bequests. We are so grateful to all of you for your sincere practice and devoted service during this past year when support for one another has been so important. The donors whose names appear in this Dana Booklet have generously given of their time, energy, material goods and money to ensure that the Zen Center continues to provide the space, teachers and community that encourage the awakening of hundreds of people a year.

With deep gratitude,

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"May we all living beings, realize the emptiness of the three worlds: Giver, Receiver and Gift."

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What is Right Speech to Someone with Cancer?

by Erin Joyful-Heart Moore

I was planning to spend Christmas holidays in Puerto Rico with my family: sun, sand, snorkeling. The ache in my gut had lasted about 5-6 months, it was slowly getting worse. I am never sick, so this was just something to ignore. Doctors counseled me to have a breath test, watch gluten and dairy, try a Low-FODMAP[1] Diet for IBS and finally I got a CT scan. My surgeon daughter said, "Mom, we call that the answering machine." There it was, the Nobel Prize, I had ovarian cancer that had spread around my abdomen. Within days I was a regular at Keck Medicine of USC and all my plans were cancelled. As they say, life would never be the same. I would now have to put "not knowing" into practice. BUT I am not ready!!! Then the questions rolled in.

It was painful to hear:

* What is your prognosis? What stage is your cancer? (My daughter had said, "Mom, we are not talking stages.")
* Let me tell you about a friend of mine/uncle/neighbor who had cancer (any cancer). (Everyone has a friend and a cancer story. I wanted to say, "You know, right now, I don't care to hear it.")
* What can I do? What do you want to eat? How can I help—(I did not know!)

So:

* Don't tell me what you learned from the Internet, particularly the percentages of my survival.
* Don't send me books on cancer—I am living it. Later, I learned that all my natural denials had a place in the literature called "adaptive denial" or "cognitive reframing" by the medical community (Dr. Keith Block). It was pure survival instinct for me.
* When my head is bald, don't say you have a lovely-shaped head. Don't ask what the spots are on top. It is hard to look beautiful bald.
* Don't tell me I am so strong; I will beat it. Rings hollow.
* Don't tell me I am so skinny, as if I am trying to be a model. Actually, cancer made me lose 10 pounds and it is not healthy and I can't do anything about it.
* Don't call me too much on the phone. I can't tell my story again and again.
* Don't ask, "No, really, hoooow ARE you?" Please I just want to hide.

Shortly after being diagnosed, I wrote in my journal "The sky is falling down. I want to be alone, so I don't have to translate my experience to someone else (who is asking): What do I need? How do I feel? How can they help me? I want to just be now."

You can show concern with simple comments:

* "I heard it has been a hard year. How is it going?"
* Send fresh salads and foods. Go light on the casseroles. I was given too many and too heavy.
* Send a book you love, a card, a journal, a sketch pad.
* Send or lend scarves—2' by 6' to cover the bald head.
* Send cuddly blankets—chemo, PET scans, and hospitals are all cold.

I found inspiration in:

* Living in Not Knowing…
* Anais Nin: "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are."
* Thich Nhat Hanh: "Hello solitude. How are you today? Come sit with me and I will care for you."
* Phil Brady: "Everyone you know is fighting battles you don't know. Be kind, be kind, be kind."
* "My rain today is my strength tomorrow." by someone wise.

Now, April 2024, more than a year has passed since the diagnosis and a lot of treatments.

I sound like I was an old grouch! I was: it was hard. Now I am reading books on post-treatment life with cancer in recession. I look over the hedge to my neighbor's house and see her window. She is in her early thirties, she too had cancer last year. We could not face each other, our bald heads and sad looks. We knew; we did not talk. Now I have texted her about the book I am reading and offered to buy her a copy. She said yes and I left it on her doorstep. We are taking baby steps, hoping we can count on our new bodies

Joyful-Heart is a professor of Anthropology at the University of Southern California.

[1] *FODMAP is Fermentable, Oligo-, Di-, Mono-saccharides And Polyols*

Working and Playing with Precepts

by Lorraine Gessho Kumpf

The exploration of Precepts is a deep, endless practice: it can be a source of discovery and realization. In traditional training, Precepts are studied in their literal sense, in their figurative sense, and as an expression of essence. Precepts can also be approached with creativity. Following is an example concerning Precept #6: "Do not talk about others' errors and faults." Quite naturally, in any social sphere, we talk about each other. Talk can convey complex social messages; it is a primary way of establishing bonds with others. Concerned with the health of my family, my sangha, and my work communities, I became attuned to damaging talk. In all these spheres, hurtful speech (particularly as gossip and other forms of triangulation) happens often, with potential damage to the community, through 'blame games', exclusive alliances, and so on.

Joseph Goldstein made a suggestion about Precept 6: For a given period of time, cease all third person conversation. That is, use 'I' (first person) and 'you' (second person). Eliminate 'he,' 'she,' 'they,' proper names, references to other. The I-you axis indicates directness between speaker and addressee. Speech in the third person is commentary—unlikely to be about the present moment. So in bluntly literal fashion, I did this exercise for two months. It was so interesting that I continued for two more!

Please Note: this exercise is NOT Precept 6! It is a way to investigate behavior and help us understand how the precept can work. Some of my results are:

1. I talked a LOT less, which was freeing.
2. It was difficult, particularly in my job, not to refer to others. I had to learn how to do it well.
3. I was highly attuned to my own speech; I learned how to avoid third person references. It was obvious to me whenever I violated the rule.
4. I was attuned to the talk of others, and how my interactions changed when not talking about others. I recognized and dealt with the reactions of others.
5. The exercise carried forward; it helped me change my interactions.

Do exercises like this have a place in our practice? Though not part of Zen training, they may help us attend to what we are doing, especially automatically. Intimate precept practice is realized in many ways.

Dharma Holder Gessho is a long-time resident, Preceptor, and the Senior Resident.

Gradients of Agreement

5	4	3	2	1	0
Endorse	**Agree** with minor point of concern	**Abstain**	**Disagree** but will support the decision	**Object** and will not help implement	**Can't go forward**
I support it wholeheartedly. This serves the whole. Let's move forward.	*Basically, I like it. It's beneficial action. My concern is not enough to hold it up.*	*I have no opinion. I'm neutral.*	*I want my disagreement noted, but I will be supportive.*	*I won't stop anyone else, but I don't want to make this happen.*	*We have to continue working.*
When can we start?	What can I offer to improve it? How can we keep these concerns in mind as we go forward?	Are you engaged or checked out? Is this outside of your expertise? Do you feel your view has been heard? Are you hearing others' views?	What complexities or shadows are emerging?	Am I being objective and open minded? Do I have enough information? Does the group have enough information?	How is this harmful? What important ingredients really need to be addressed?

The Gradients of Agreement came into use at the Zen Center of Los Angeles around 2013, as a "skillful means for exploring various organizational dharmas or making a decision." (see WW article by Roshi Egyoku Nakao here) The process involves identifying varying levels of agreement, allowing for more nuanced and reflective decision making. By recognizing that not all decisions need to be unanimously agreed upon, dissenting voices can be considered, and groups can move forward in a more collaborative and harmonious ways. Participants see multiple perspectives and find common ground, rather than getting hung up on differences of opinion. Overall, the approach promotes a sense of inclusivity and respect for individual viewpoints, which ultimately fosters more thoughtful communication, deeper listening, and sustainability.

by Jitsujo Gauthier

Sangha Practices with Microaggressions

Tobi Keido Rider

Microaggressions are defined as observable statements, actions, or incidents of indirect, subtle, or discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.[1] These are recurring daily instances of racism, homophobia, sexism (and more) that you see in the world. Sometimes it's an insult, other times it's a comment or gesture. They must have clear causal effects—reinforcing pathological stereotypes and inequitable social norms.

Receiving bad treatment, being insulted, criticism or stern advice does not constitute a microaggression. It is important to note this distinction because it is far too easy to weaponize the language of social theory, psychotherapy, or spirituality, to advance an activist agenda or personal goals, over an unbiased view of the truth.

To be clear, the "micro" in microaggression doesn't mean that these acts can't have big, life-changing impacts. They can, which is all the more reason why they must be addressed immediately when you see them. Failing to address microaggressions in the moment they occur may result in harboring resentment/rage (violation of the 9th precept). Think of the Koan about the two monks and the woman who asked to be carried across the river. Once it's gone, it's gone.

[1] Limbong, Andrew. "Microaggressions are a big deal: How to talk them out and when to walk away", NPR: Life Kit. June 9, 2020.

R. Waldorf

I observe a need to bring to the light things which are uncomfortable both in community, and internally. Through that discomfort—growing-pains if you will—learning, growing and the impetus to do better can arise. Maybe the vulnerability and willingness to take accountability for harm will serve to help my little 'orbit,' the greater orbit of [maha] sangha(s), all beings.

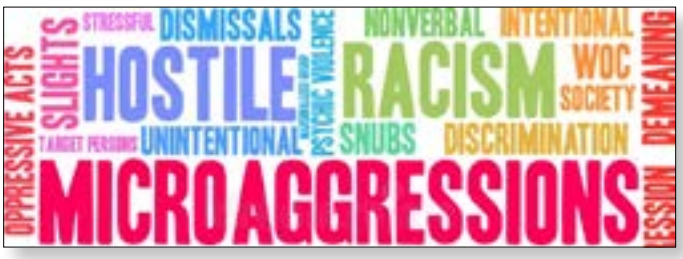
Microaggressions are inextricably linked with racism, and therefore anti-racism. When first confronted with the term "anti-racism," I thought, Well, that's easy! I'm not racist. Therefore, I must be anti-racist. Upon more training, I learned how I do have racist thoughts, and that I enact microaggressions. The knee-jerk defenses for how I couldn't possibly be racist—I have friends of color! I practice towards liberation of all beings! I don't want to cause harm, and anyway, racists live elsewhere and harbor hate in their hearts—this fell away (and continues to arise and fall away) to illuminate more opportunities to confront my complicity in causing and perpetuating harm.

Geri Meiho Bryan

We've all witnessed moments that make us uncomfortable, but do we always recognize why? Recently, I witnessed an exchange that prompted me to deep dive into my own understanding of microaggressions. A white coworker approached a colleague of color and, in what seemed like a compliment, asked if they could touch their face because of their beautiful skin. However, the POC coworker was clearly uncomfortable with the request. This incident is a microaggression because it crossed a personal boundary. The request reinforces stereotypes of POC as different in a way that feels objectifying. Even if meant kindly, it treats the person as an object of curiosity rather than respecting them as an individual.

Another example is at the Zendo during a meditation retreat. Someone of color looked to be having anxiety, a white person touched them, offering reassurance. The microaggression here compounds underlying power dynamics—the white person assumed they could touch a POC without consent and perhaps felt a responsibility to solve situations for others. This can lead to a white savior complex, unintentionally undermining the person's ability to solve their own problems—I see this in myself; awareness helps me take the backward step and come from not knowing—a better way to be supportive. If someone seems distressed, ask, "Is there anything I can get for you?"

In short, be mindful before touching or 'fixing'. Take the backward step instead. It could be a step towards a more inclusive world.



COUNCIL BEGINNINGS *(Continued from page 5)*

And so we did.

It was not smooth sailing: people would wait out the clock. We truly did not know how to speak, nor was there any sense of trust. I learned to schedule councils for 60 minutes or more—usually after about 40 minutes, someone would grab the talking piece and say, "I just can't sit here silently anymore." Occasionally, people would stomp out of the council, only to return later because "I don't want to miss anything." We learned through trial and error, and gradually, over many years, we began to weave the threads which became the fabric of sangha. I have been encouraged by those who are willing to return to the circle over and over again, especially in those raw early years. The circle experiment is ongoing.

By now we know the key components of Council, such as speak from the heart, no cross talk, use the talking piece, spontaneous speech. Each of these components challenges and trains us in taking the backward step, listening, and trusting. These are well articulated in our Council practice handbook.[3] It aligns beautifully with the Three Tenets and, in fact, we have incorporated the Tenets into the Council guidelines. I leave it to the reader to familiarize themself with these foundations.

I want to highlight a few points which one might overlook regarding council as practiced at ZCLA. First, council practice is not something we do only when there is a problem to address. Rather, without ongoing council practice, we will not have a container to hold us when problems arise, as they surely do. Council invites us to be present together in the same physical space just as we are in the moment. In our hyper-active, product-oriented culture, many consider this to be a waste of time. In Council, we set aside the diseases of efficiency and productivity of our culture. Instead we practice receptivity, opening, listening, surprise, and spontaneity as a way of dissolving the cages we have built around ourselves.

Second, by participating in Council practice, the teachers can shift to horizontal mode. Teachers, too, are students of Dharma, an understanding often obscured due to their roles. When we began council practice, people would look at me when they spoke. I had to continually remind them to speak to the circle, not to me. This is not a simple practice for teachers either—it asks them to relinquish their teacher identity. I recall when Maezumi Roshi once joined us in an early facilitated attempt at working on communication with a small group of people. It was very challenging for him to sit and listen. He acknowledged this difficulty and, at one point, he turned to me and said, "Egyoku, hold me back!" In a circle, everyone is equally a teacher and equally a student.

The introduction of horizontal upayas has shifted and reshaped ZCLA's practice culture in significant ways. The upayas we adopt at ZCLA require a sustained commitment and practice for both individuals and the group. As early pioneers in collective wisdom for large-scale change, my mentors John Ott and Rose Pinard,[4] have masterfully created portals for entering collective wisdom and signalling when we are headed to collective folly. I consider these principles for entering the portals of awakened activity to be Bodhisattva precepts themselves.

To enter the portal for collective wisdom/compassion, we as individuals observe the following in our actions:

Am I embracing not-knowing?
Am I deepening self-awareness?
Am I strengthening relationships?

All three components must be present to be an effective upaya. As a group, our actions can be considered by asking the following:

Are we orienting to the whole?
Are we welcoming all that arises?
Are we nuturing the alignment of intention?

We are also provided with guidelines that help us to recognize when we are headed for folly. As individuals, we check ourself by asking:

Am I embracing only my knowing?
Am I deepening my judgement of others?
Am I stressing my relationships?

As a group, these precepts ask us to check:

Are we orienting only to the part we know?
Are we welcoming only what we want?
Are we pretending to have agreement when we don't?

Each of us knows intimatley both individual and group folly; it behooves us to cultivate the practices that move us to wisdom and love.

Both zazen and council practice require sustained effort. They are the two arms of the awakened person. Zazen centers us in non-duality; circle practices center us in actualizing compassion as it manifests in openness, receptivity, inclusion, and acceptance. The Sangha comes alive when both are embodied in our very being. They are both complete when it happens and reveals itself over time.

[3] *https://zcla.org/about/council-resources*

[4] *John Ott and Rose Pinard, the founders of the Center for Collective Wisdom, mentored ZCLA in our spirituality organization initiative.*

Roshi Egyoku is the Senior Dharma Teacher at ZCLA.

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Sangha Rites of Passage

New Members

Mary Yugen Courtney
Naomi Dong
Laura Hull
Marinel Mukherjee

In Memorium

Buster the Cat Moon-Heart Kumpf
2002-2024

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coordinated by Betty Jiei Cole

The San Luis Obispo Zen Circle (CA)
led by Sensei Mark Shogen Bloodgood

Wild River Zen Circle (Nevada City, CA)
led by Sensei Jeanne Dokai Dickenson

The Valley Sangha (Woodland Hills, CA)
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