

III. SANGHA COMMITMENT

SILENT THUNDER ORDER

Revision 120627

INTRODUCTION

The rules of conduct (Skt. *Vinaya*) for the original Buddhist Order in India were apparently compiled incrementally, as incidents occurred and rules had to be instituted. As the monastic tradition spread through China and Japan, the regulations (J. *Shingi*) were updated to meet new situations and to adapt to differing cultural norms. Now we are in a similar situation, as Soto Zen is becoming mainstream in America, largely as a lay practice, rather than monastic.

As in the countries and cultures of origin, the scope and application probably followed the arising of conflict, complaints, and grievances amongst the Sangha. People were people then, and are still today. Most of the policies and context contained in this document come from similar references published by other American Zen organizations. The rest is fleshed out based on experience at affiliated Zen centers.

Careful examination of this record of activity at local and remote practice centers reveals certain implications for behavior within the unique context of the Sangha. Behaviors that may be acceptable—even laudable—in other groups may not have their intended consequences. Competing rather than cooperating will not likely result in a promotion, for example. Outshining everyone in Dharma dialog may reveal one's ignorance rather than one's insight. While this kind of behavior does not rise to the level of lying or stealing, perhaps, it draws undue attention to oneself and drains the positive energy of the Sangha. In this way it can be a form of dishonesty and thievery.

Practice within Sangha is fraught with unintended consequences, especially when we attempt to graft successful coping strategies from other areas of our life, such as the home, the office, and recreation. Most of the standards for appropriate Sangha behavior amount to simple common sense, ordinary politeness, and development of people skills.

A Zen Sangha is first and foremost a learning community led by a disciple-teacher group, and intended to support a focus on buddha-dharma. In instances of distraction from that focus and divisiveness, emphasis should always reside in respectful disagreement, and the peaceful resolution of differences. It is absolutely prohibited to intentionally foster disharmony in the Sangha, for any reason. Those who are unwilling or unable to make a serious commitment to these social aspects of Zen practice should not waste their time further, not to mention that of the Sangha.

Examples listed below do not necessarily represent potential policies, but are offered for consideration. They are not placed in a hierarchy because they have no relative weight in terms of importance, urgency or priority. They are cases of behavior illustrating real-world situations that reveal the mind through the actions of mouth and body. Some of them do not readily fit under speech or body exclusively, as speech and action are often intricately intertwined, succinctly captured in the popular vernacular as *body language*. As we chant in the Repentances, we avow our past harmful karma through actions born of body, mouth and mind.

A. LOVING SPEECH

A slip of the tongue is difficult to avoid at times. Sanghas practice standards of discourse and dialog in which etiquette and respect for others are much more critical than in casual conversation.

Questioning

During or after a Dharma dialog, questions are typically taken, and answers given, within the constraints of time available. Usually, a lively exchange of ideas is encouraged. Guests, Sangha

members and Juniors should defer to Seniors in resolving any dispute or confusion that arises in discussion.

It is acceptable to question, or even challenge, any teaching for the sake of clarification, if done respectfully. It is not acceptable to argue or debate. Preaching or proselytizing dogmas and beliefs, in the guise of discussing spiritual teachings, is particularly offensive.

Lecturing

Sangha attending Dharma dialog at a Zen center came to listen to the Guiding Teacher or Guest Speaker. Teachers and guest speakers are practicing charity by preparing and giving talks and other presentations of buddha-dharma.

It is acceptable to address the speaker for clarification of some point that may conflict with or contradict your understanding garnered elsewhere. It is not acceptable to address the audience, sharing with them your own view of the point being made.

Criticizing

Sangha members should appreciate the stewardship, management and care of the practice place. All areas of legitimate concern. No one sees the extent of the effort that goes on behind the scenes. The responsibility for taking care of the practice place is shared by all members of the Sangha, but its purview lies directly with the BOD.

It is acceptable to raise such issues in the appropriate forum (BOD), or to the appropriate person. If you do not know who the right person or forum is, ask. It is not acceptable to complain repeatedly to others about such things. When presenting a problem, wrap it in a solution.

Respecting Confidentiality

Many situations in Sangha practice call for confidentiality, both one-on-one transactions and in groups. These include Dokusan; practice discussion; BOD meetings; AAC meetings; even casual conversation and email messages can be sensitive. While Priest-Student discussions may not qualify as protected, Teachers should not disclose information they receive in dokusan or practice discussion. This is especially true when confidentiality is requested and agreed to, unless serious harm may result to individuals or to the Sangha if the information is not disclosed. Even when there is no specific request for confidentiality, such information is not to be shared casually under any circumstances by either of the people involved in the conversation.

It is acceptable to share confidential information under extraordinary circumstances or by permission. It is not acceptable to do otherwise, especially for purposes of gain, or malicious gossip.

Keeping Secrets

Secrets are fertile ground for the three poisons of greed, anger and delusion. But they don't ultimately work. Best-kept secrets fulfill the adages that the truth will out, and nothing is so obvious as that which is hidden. Often, a hidden agenda can be seen in one's body language. In some cases, a secret can be a skillful means of mitigating suffering. In others, a great source of suffering. It is particularly important that finances, decision-making structure, and minutes of major decision-making bodies (BOD) be made available to Sangha in accessible and understandable form.

It is acceptable to limit the dissemination of information on a need-to-know basis, particularly if the information is incomplete, or sensitive enough to embarrass a member of Sangha. It is not acceptable to deliberately withhold information that has substantial relevance to the issues under discussion, or that is of significant import to the general welfare of the Sangha.

Naysaying

In the spirit of non-possessiveness, decision-making bodies such as the BOD and its committees, advisory councils, et cetera, should endeavor to make decisions together in a cooperative and accountable manner, and with a wholehearted effort to consider all points of view.

It is acceptable in these forums to respectfully disagree with proposals and policies being discussed. It is not acceptable to occupy a preconceived position, e.g. playing the role of naysayer, no matter the item under discussion. Knee-jerk hypercriticism wastes the time of other Sangha BOD members.

Fomenting Factionalism

Sanghas can become divided, and divisive, over issues and concerns not within members' discretion. The style of teaching, protocols of service, even the apparent relative status of Priests and Disciples can become wedge issues in service of creating a separate following. Many people these days have prior experience, so it is natural that some members question such things from time to time.

Such concerns, however, are legitimately the province of a Disciple, one who has entered into the first formal stage of training under the supervision of the Guiding Teacher. Teaching and service protocols are the bailiwick of the Abbess/Abbot and Advisory Council. If something truly disturbs, take it up with them. But Zen is not designed to please everyone. Be prepared to live with whatever disposition ensues. If you find yourself obsessing, or becoming an inveterate critic, it may be time to move on to another Sangha.

It is often around such trivial distractions that interpersonal criticism arises, and factions form. Loyalty to those who happen to agree with you, and enmity towards those who do not, develop. As Master Dogen reminds us, one has to be "deaf and blind to be worthy of being head of the household." Meaning that most of this should roll off like the proverbial duck-riding water.

It is acceptable to question the form and organization of teaching offered to the Sangha, to a reasonable degree. It is not acceptable and detrimental to Sangha harmony to undermine their confidence in the teaching leadership and training staff.

B. HONORING THE BODY

Ch'an Master Lung-Ya said: In this life save the body, it is the fruit of many lives. Saving the body can mean practicing good health and hygiene, but also not misusing one's own body or that of another. Of course, in Zen mind and body cannot separate, so we aspire to honor the body-mind of buddha-nature. The body of the Sangha, as well as that of the practice place, is under our care as well.

Leaving no Traces

An Old Buddha used to say: I like to keep it empty around here. Sanghas practice cleaning as a matter of course, especially during retreats, but also on a daily basis. Nonetheless, various items are often left scattered about after a meeting, resulting in cluttering the visual space. This can be detrimental to the attention of the Sangha. The zendo, in particular, should always appear as if no one has been occupying it. The ultimate responsibility lies with the Facility Committee of the BOD, but all Sangha members should assume responsibility for cleaning up after themselves in a public space.

It is acceptable to accumulate a reasonable amount of clutter from time to time, in common areas as well as in closed rooms and offices. It is not acceptable to collect and store unused items, particularly in shared areas. It is most egregious when junk and clutter hinder the aisles, and access to storage areas.

Furnishing

The furnishings of a Sangha practice center are subject to the rising tide of clutter, as well as other problems. Members often offer to donate furnishings that they no longer need at home, resulting in the space becoming a hodgepodge of eyesores and navigational barriers. For this reason the BOD and Abbot/Abbess confer on furnishings and control their acquisition based on design intent of space utilization. This is always evolving, but is not at the discretion of any member to arrange as they see fit.

It is acceptable to offer furniture and furnishings, through proper channels; if approved, the item may be accepted and installed in the space. It is not acceptable to build or install furniture, decorative furnishings, or to build such items for use without express, advance permission. It is especially irresponsible to arbitrarily reposition existing furnishings without permission, and not put them back.

Socializing

Most of us do not belong to many truly harmonious groups that practice mutual respect, so a Sangha can seem a very welcoming place. But a practice center Sangha is not primarily oriented to community in the social sense. The *raison d'être* for a Sangha is to support its members in their practice of zazen and study of buddha-dharma. It is not intended as a place to recruit friends, business colleagues, potential lovers or spouses.

It is acceptable to attend for purposes of finding a support group of like-minded people. And for them to welcome you to the community. It is not acceptable to attend only or mainly for the purpose of social engagement, and having a forum in which to express one's views or engage in idle chatter.

Dressing

Dress code varies widely from Sangha to Sangha. Most modes of dress at Zen centers lean toward dark and earth tones, such as black, brown, and greys, which are inoffensive. Moderation is the key and clothing choice is given a wide latitude in Zen circles, but conformity is good. In business, the saying is "I would love to listen to what you are saying, but your clothing is speaking too loudly."

Standards follow social norms of modesty and decency, e.g. eschewing overly revealing, skimpy outfits, beachwear, gaudy and clashing colors, including graphic message teeshirts and sweatshirts. These standards are meant to mitigate the effect that such clothing has on the perception of the Sangha, causing them to think about something they should not have to think about. Clothing is signal, and we encourage all to turn down the volume.

When leading a group in sitting zazen or especially conducting service, Priests and Disciples are expected to dress the part, wearing reasonably comfortable but suitably professional garb and vestments. This also applies to any member opening the door for others to join in zazen in the zendo. One slogan suggestion: Got a key? Wear the Gi!

It is acceptable to wear comfortable clothing to practice zazen with the Sangha. It is not acceptable to distract them by drawing undue attention to your outfit.

Offending

Presence within and effect upon Sangha is affected by speech and action, to a lesser degree by appearance, and even smell. Practitioners of zazen commonly experience an enhancement of their sensory sensitivity at some point in the process. Cleanliness and cleaning (*J. soji*) includes not only attention to the environment, but to personal hygiene as well. For example, wearing clean socks in the zendo, rather than going barefoot, protects the carpet from accumulating body oil and soil. Going barefoot outside or in socks and then returning to the zendo compounds the problem. Strongly scented deodorants and perfumes can offend and even nauseate others.

It is acceptable to practice a reasonable, healthy degree of personal hygiene in Sangha. It is not acceptable to allow your presence to become offensive to others.

Investing Emotion

In many forms of social and professional interaction, including working at the office or at home, there arises a phenomenon that for lack of a better term might be called “emotional debt.” This is the underappreciated and overworked syndrome that often appears in relationships, including those in Sangha. Such behaviors as purchasing and providing and paying for paper goods, flowers, soaps and other necessary staples for maintaining the practice place may fall to individuals, particularly Tenants and Residents, to step up and take care of them. This behind-the-scenes activity may go unnoticed and unappreciated by the rest of the Sangha. Emotional debt may accumulate.

It is acceptable to perform such actions of *dana* or “hidden virtue” on behalf of the Sangha. It is not acceptable to feel unappreciated, or to harbor resentment over not being sufficiently appreciated. If this develops, simply submit all receipts to the BOD for reimbursement, or cease performing the service. Someone else will notice and step up to the plate. This is also generosity.

Substituting for Practice

Clergy in particular, but all other members of Sangha as well, are subject to a syndrome that may be called the *substitution effect*. When one takes on additional duties as a Disciple or Priest, it may gradually effect the practice of Zen, especially *zazen*. For example, it may result in attending only when one is scheduled to lead the session, rather than simply to sit. This contradicts the *zazen* focus of Sangha, and the dictum that one’s greatest contribution is one’s presence. Taking on a task in service to Sangha, such as sitting on the BOD or helping with outreach, is subject to the same syndrome.

It is acceptable to take on tasks and positions of service to the Sangha that are consonant with one’s abilities and temperament. The Sangha needs all the help it can get. It is not acceptable to assume that one’s role in Sangha is limited to those tasks or that position, or to allow those functions to take the place of one’s personal commitment to practice, particularly *zazen*. It should be self-evident that one’s ownership of the role, however rewarding, is impermanent and subject to rotation.

Consuming

Like any other public entity, a Sangha practice center should be operated as efficiently as possible. This applies to the consumption of energy, water, and such material items as paper goods. There are many ideas about how to best manage this, some of which may make sense, but others that represent false economies. Any radical change in procedures requires approval of the BOD.

Such simple things as turning off lights, fans, and air conditioning, when the space is unoccupied, and keeping settings at a moderate level of comfort, have a multiplier effect in terms of savings than when we do the same at home. Taking care to take brief showers, and efficient methods of dishwashing are other examples. All should strive for moderation.

It is acceptable to control one’s own use of the assets of the Sangha center in sensible ways to achieve savings in consumption. It is not acceptable to dictate that others must use the facilities in a way that one devises, however well-intended. The supposed economy may turn out to be false.

Drinking and Drugging

When any member of the Sangha is involved in abusive or addictive use of intoxicants, it is cause for great concern. The freedom found in Zen is not license to flout the law. The Zen person has no problem following the sidewalks, as Matsuoka Roshi would say.

Anyone who engages in excessive or clandestine indulgence of drugs, alcohol, or any other addictive or controlled substance on the premises without the knowledge and express consent of the

Sangha leadership, exhibits a profound lack of understanding of Zen, contempt for Sangha, a cavalier lack of concern for and willingness to jeopardize the legal status of the center's charter as a 501c3.

It is acceptable to engage in moderate consumption of legal intoxicants when expressly approved by the BOD and AAC on special occasions, events, and holidays. It is not acceptable to take this decision into your own hands. It is reprehensible to threaten the Sangha by breaking the law.

Seducing

Sexuality is embraced as part of karmic consciousness, and therefore a respected and cherished avenue for developing a deeper understanding of buddha-dharma. It has, however, been recognized historically as a potential threat to harmony in the Sangha, from the beginning of the original Order. This partially explains the predominance of celibacy in the arc of Buddhist monastic practice.

Ours is a lay practice, which embraces the household and family life, including sexuality and procreation, as a normal and complex dimension of Zen practice for everyone. However, this embrace does not extend to the misuse of sexuality as outlined in the prohibitions against age-inappropriate and teacher-student boundary-crossing behavior.

It is especially important for Priests and Disciples, and any member of the Sangha who enjoys a position of responsibility and respect, to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. This is especially germane in the welcoming and treatment of newcomers, who may be overly impressed by the appearance of status within the community. Some newcomers are in vulnerable condition, having lost a loved one or spouse, and looking for a way to deal with grief and loneliness. This is one of the reasons minimum grace periods of six months to a year are widely observed in Zen communities, before approaching another for dating purposes.

It is acceptable to engage Sangha members for the sake of the dharma, in friendly and warm ways that may be difficult for them to distinguish from a personal interest. It is not acceptable to use the visibility and apparent respect accorded a position of honor in the Sangha to seduce Sangha members or newcomers one finds attractive. For a Priest to engage in such unbecoming conduct is predatory.

Stalking

Stalking is illegal behavior in most situation, but it may go unrecognized under the guise of friendship or supposed admiration, even expressed as reverence. Unwanted familiarity and uninvited appearances in the private zone of Sangha members is expressly forbidden, however lofty the motive.

It is acceptable to form friendly relationships within the Sangha. It is not acceptable to presume upon the good will of Sangha members to press an agenda of closeness that is not shared by both parties.

Violence

Needless to say, all forms of willful or intentional violence against another Sangha member, or oneself, constitute grounds for removal from the Sangha, and probable prosecution. Physical violence and abusive behavior (which includes physical threats, extreme displays of anger and maliciousness) are a kind of "killing" according to Buddhism. In keeping with the aspiration of harmlessness, all firearms and other weapons designed principally for taking life have no place within Zen practice places. The exception would be for purposes of martial arts demonstrations, but they would not be allowed to be stored on-site.

It is acceptable to embrace violence as part of Nature, and to resort to it in defense of life and safety or the Sangha. It is not acceptable to use it to exert one's will, or to achieve selfish goals.