

Council Practice at Clouds in Water Zen Center

1. Council is a way of being in community in which mindful speech and deep listening is consciously practiced within the council form. The basic form is a circle. The circle may have facilitators, but they are also participants, not "leaders." All members have an equal voice and are accorded equal respect. The three treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are embraced within this form.
2. At Clouds in Water we have used council to select a guiding teacher, make budget decisions, discuss organizational values, process changes and share our spiritual practice with each other.
3. Ancient tradition
 - a. Councils (or circle process) were an integral part of the Native American cultures.
 - b. Tradition can be traced to the League of the Iroquois and the native peoples of the Plains and Southwestern Pueblos.
 - c. Council Practice has roots in ceremonial, spiritual, and communal practice.
 - d. Fundamental to the council process are deep silence and focused listening, much like that of a Quaker meeting.

Values of Council The Three Tenets – The Three Treasures

Not Knowing (The Oneness of Buddha)

- Participate with a spirit of not knowing, of not having fixed ideas or clinging to one point of view.
- Maintain a spaciousness of mind, with no separation, allow whatever arises to come up and grow
- Aim for total openness
- Be willing to let go
- There is no right or wrong

Bearing Witness (The Diversity of Dharma)

- Right speech, right listening, right silence
- We are all connected and all uniquely different
- Listen to the other's truth
- Step into the other's truth
- See what is in the sangha, with no judgment
- See our own ego process, what keeps us stuck, with no judgment
- Be totally present with what is happening.

Appropriate Action (The Harmony of Sangha)

- Let action flow out of the process.
- Don't be in a hurry to get to a solution.
- Let ideas and feelings arise, and let the problem solving grow out of the process.
- Wait for all views and all voices
- Trust the working of the council process
- The answers will develop

Setting up the Council – some helpful hints

- Two facilitators who are very familiar with council practice and can help keep the group within the form.
- Have an opening and closing ritual – such as lighting a candle, observing silence, doing a short chant. Review the guidelines each time before beginning to set the tone. Have a talking piece. Whoever holds the piece may speak, everyone else listens.
- Sometimes helpful to have a participant who acts as a witness only. The witness will observe and reflect back to the group the dynamics that took place during the council. (The witness speaks at the very end of the council).

Foundations of Council The Intentions

Speaking From the Heart

- This is the essence of council
- Be as honest as you can (make eye contact with others in the circle, if possible)
- Imagine your words emerging from the mid-chest rather than the mouth
- Allows for a feeling of expansion and greater connectedness to the others
- Hold the talking piece and search your heart for your feelings
- Focus on personal revelation rather than philosophical reflection (use "I" statements")
- Express yourself without making you right and someone else wrong
- Honesty will grow as trust of the group/process grows
- Speak loud enough so that all can hear you.
- Silence is an important part of the process and can be held at any time. Pass if you are not ready to speak.

Listening from the Heart

- Listen with devotion and full 100% attention
- Let go of the self and be totally present (make eye contact, don't look down)
- Train your whole body to listen deeply (e.g., sitting alert)
- Feel a heart connection to what is being said
- Overcome the instinct to construct what you are going to say while others

are speaking

- Be aware when you are distracted and bring attention back to focus
- Listening to someone is a great gift
- If you cannot hear, speak up
- Be aware of the possibility that your thinking may be altered by what you hear
- Be aware if you are not willing to let go of your own view
- Go for win-win, not right-wrong.

Lean Expression

- Take responsibility for delivering your message concisely
- Be aware of equal time for all to speak
- Be aware if you are repeating or rambling
- Refrain from talking about people not known to participants
- Refrain from getting lost in tangential topics
- Be patient if you or someone truly needs extra time
- Feel free to give honest feedback to another person when it is your turn to talk
- Honor those who are not as articulate as others
- Don't repeat what has already been said
- Reading is not in the spirit of council.
- In rare cases, a time limit can be set per person.

Speaking Out

- If you have something to say, don't hold back.
- Speak loudly and clearly so that everyone can hear you.

Spontaneity (Speaking from Not Knowing)

- Reminder: speak from the heart
- Try not to rehearse what you are going to say ahead of time, even if you are nervous
- Trust the emergence of your expression – let the moment evoke what needs to be said
- Tie into the larger voice of the circle
- You can hold the talking piece silently for inspiration
- You can check your body for the location of sensations of the moment to help spontaneity
- If you have feelings that you can't share with the circle, it is essential to share your reluctance with the group.
- Trust the wisdom of the group.

Confidentiality

- It is important not to reveal what is said by any individual during council outside the group. You may bring up something that was said, but only if they individual's identity can be protected.
- After the council, don't ask someone about something they brought up in council. It's OK if you want to talk about something you brought up in council.
- It is also OK to reveal general themes brought up in council.