

Summary

Facilitated Sangha Discussion

Zen Studies Society

This is to summarize the structure of a facilitated discussion meeting for the Zen Studies Society, held at Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-Ji on August 27 and 28, 2011. It was facilitated by An Olive Branch, a group centered out of the Zen Center of Pittsburgh that is committed to, among other things, assisting organizations like ZSS arrive at facilitated resolution in difficult circumstances. The meeting was in five parts:

1. Informational Paper presented by An Olive Branch Founder Rev. Kyoki Roberts
2. Ground Rules Discussion
3. Timeline – ZSS History
4. Samoan Circle
5. Consensus Workshop

Informational Paper presented by An Olive Branch

The purpose of this part of the meeting was to contextualize the ZSS situation, providing an overview of sexual misconduct within spiritual communities, the impact it has on members, the particular aspects of monastic training that may influence the frequency of sexual misconduct, and ways individuals can work effectively within a fractured community.

This part of the meeting was received with mixed reviews. For a transcript of the Informational Paper, please contact kyoki@an-olive-branch.org.

Ground Rules Discussion

The purpose of this part of the meeting was to generate and accept ground rules for the remainder of the time together as a group, to define acceptable and unacceptable behavior for meeting participants.

This process took about one and half hours.

Meeting participants and the facilitators agreed that they would abide by the ground rules and that whatever was reported to others outside the meeting would not contain attributions to or about specific individuals. Rules included such items as no interruptions, one comment or question and follow-up per turn, no personal attacks, people talk one at a time, no cross-talking, etc.

Additionally, two procedural proposals were recommended. First, the participants agreed to try to collectively craft a public statement about what was said at the meeting. Hurricane Irene and the premature departure of some participants precluded the group from doing so. Second, anyone who preferred to make an anonymous statement was encouraged to write their concerns on a 4x6 card and insert it in a box. One participant agreed to read these if needed; none, however, were generated.

Time Line -- ZSS History

Not all meeting participants had the same level of historical familiarity with ZSS. This part of the meeting was to present a history of ZSS to the participants - including events, meetings, and decisions made in the past - to provide a baseline of information

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as a starting point for later interactions and better communication. At the beginning of the activity, a large printout of the time line was posted on the wall, participants were given handouts of the same, and Board President Soun read the timeline out loud. Participants were then given colored post-it notes to add to the timeline and to react to the timeline as follows:

- Orange = "I have new information to add."
- Green = "I have a question; I want more information."
- Yellow = "This event (or information) was an 'a-ha' moment; a turning point for me."
- Red = "This event (or information) was very emotional for me. "

Participants came to the front of the room, read their post-it note, and placed it on the timeline at the appropriate point.



Photograph of the timeline assembled by meeting participants.

Samoan Circle

This portion of the meeting was designed to allow all Sangha members (present and not present) to make a heartfelt statement of their feelings and concerns related to the events of the last year-and-a-half within ZSS (and earlier) and to have their concerns acknowledged by the Board (and, as the meeting progressed, also by the rest of the participants).

Participants were seated in a circle and asked to write each of their individual concerns on a 4x6 card. After completing their cards, participants were invited to move to one of

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three empty chairs in a small inner circle comprised of Shinge Roshi, Soun Joe Dowling (later, Larry Shainberg), and two of the facilitators. Everyone else sat in an outer circle observing those in the inner circle. After the participant presented his or her concern(s), either Shinge Roshi, Soun or one of the facilitators made a restatement to acknowledge the key points they raised and asked them if they felt heard. If so, the Sangha member was asked to place their 4x6 card in a bucket in the center of the room as a sign that they had been heard. This procedure was later revised to include a step in which the entire Sangha present voiced the phrase “We hear you” to acknowledge the speaker.

During the voicing of concerns, Sangha members also raised several suggestions for what could be done in the future to help the Sangha as it moves forward. These were memorialized during the **Consensus Workshop** part of the meeting.

This process of sharing lasted for about six hours interrupted only by time for rest room breaks, the announcement by Shoteki that someone had "keyed" his car, and an angry outburst by one Sangha member who was asked to meet with the psychologist who was “on call” all weekend for just such purposes.

The last step in the Samoan Circle was a small ceremony led by Shinge Roshi after dinner. During the ceremony the cards containing Sangha members’ concerns that had been deposited in the bucket were set on fire to symbolize that they had been heard by all.

Consensus Workshop

The activities and discussion above focused on the revelations of ethical breaches and the Sangha members’ emotions related to those breaches. The remainder of the meeting was about how ZSS could move forward. A focus question was posed: “What issues need to be addressed in order to grow a new lotus flower from this muddy water?” Participants first worked alone to brainstorm answers to the question; then in pairs, coming up with 5 ideas per pair to share with the group.

The participants decided to consolidate and pose their ideas in the form of questions to challenge ZSS leadership to action. Participants’ ideas, over 54 in all, generally fell within eight categories. These included:

1. How can we explore our vision and values to actualize the Dharma?
2. How can we address the sangha's suffering from the past?
3. How can we improve the ZSS organizational design?
4. How can we protect the legal, financial and environmental assets of ZSS?
5. How can we promote mutual respect and harmony in the sangha?
6. How do we open ZSS to wider community participation?
7. How can we create a sustainable financial future?
8. How can we best handle Eido Roshi's retirement?

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The consensus workshop took six hours to complete, running well past a normal break for lunch.

Conclusion

The Zen Studies Society has held a respected place within the larger Buddhist community for many years. This respect has been severely tested. Many strong Sangha members have felt they had to leave ZSS when their concerns were not addressed by previous boards, and during the meeting many stories were heard regarding how painful those departures have been both for those who stayed and for those who left.

This meeting demonstrated that there are Sangha members who are deeply committed to the future of ZSS, as evidenced by their willingness to return to DBZ despite Hurricane Irene, listen to each other's stories, and begin to co-create a way forward. This work was emotionally exhausting, but extremely important. It established a precedent for how ZSS must interact going forward. We believe any possible rebuilding of the ZSS will require more of this kind of commitment, respect for each other, deep listening, open communication, and prompt, transparent and sustained action by the Board.