



RADIANT LIGHT ZEN

Guidance for Dharma Sharing

Welcome to Radiant Light Zen, home of Morning Light Sangha, Two Palms Up Sangha, Anacortes Mindfulness Community, and Wise Caregiving. Our practice is rooted in the Plum Village Zen tradition founded by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. **We're so glad you're here.**

Coming together to share the Dharma is a wonderful opportunity to learn from each other's insights and experiences on our path of awakening. As we express our joys as well as our sorrows, we hold sacred space for one another, strengthening our beloved community, deepening our trust, and nurturing our understanding of ourselves and each other.

The following guidance is designed to cultivate a harmonious, safe space, free from harm and judgement, where everyone feels welcome and a true sense of belonging. We practice with compassion and a wholehearted desire to understand, using deep listening and loving speech so everyone can flourish and enjoy the benefits of this beautiful spiritual practice.

May the merit of our practice benefit all beings and bring peace.

Dharma Sharing Guidelines

THE KEY ELEMENTS

1. Bow in and out and include your name
2. Share from your experience and insight, always from the heart
3. Honor confidentiality
4. Practice deep listening
5. Pause and enjoy 3 breaths between sharings
6. Water positive seeds with loving, mindful speech
7. Address the whole Sangha and try to be succinct
8. Avoid giving advice
9. Allow others to contribute before speaking a second time
10. Support the Sangha by nurturing a welcoming and safe space for all

THE DETAILS

1. Bow in and out, including your name

When you'd like to share, bring your palms together like a lotus bud in front of your heart and bow to the circle. Alternatively, you may raise your hand or use another signal that feels comfortable to you to show that you would like to share. Everyone will bow/signal back acknowledging that they are ready to listen deeply.

In a Zoom room ("Zoomdo"), you simply unmute, bow or otherwise signal, and then begin speaking.

Smiling and saying your name as you begin is welcoming for newcomers and refreshing for those who have difficulty remembering names. It's beneficial even when there are only "regulars" present.

When you're finished, let the Sangha know by bowing out or using your preferred signal.

These gestures are like quotation marks around what you would like to say. During the time in between, you have the space to speak mindfully without interruption, which helps to create a safe and harmonious environment.

We try to remember to enjoy three breaths before the next person speaks to help us fully receive the last sharing.

2. Share your experience and insight, always from the heart

We base our sharing on our own life experience and practice rather than on abstract ideas and theoretical discussions. It's best to explore theories and opinions on our own time. Time together as a Sangha is precious and we get the most benefit when we learn from each other's experiences. For example, insights or difficulties you might have had, a comment about how the reading or Dharma talk resonates with you, or you may wish to ask a question.

3. Honor confidentiality and refrain from gossip

Everything that is shared is confidential. What is said here, stays here. Confidentiality is essential in creating a safe space and preventing gossip. After Dharma Sharing, if you want to talk with someone about what they shared in the group, please ask permission first. Sometimes a person doesn't want to talk about what they shared and it's respectful to honor their wishes.

4. Practice deep listening

When others are speaking, we listen deeply with our full attention and presence. Our deepest aspiration is to listen in order to understand, rather than respond. Even though this is our intention, it's natural that our mind may wander. Perhaps we're agreeing, disagreeing, feeling agitated, judging what is being said, wanting to respond, or daydreaming. If we're mindful of our thoughts and inner dialogue, we can choose to come back to being present with the person speaking using eyes and ears of compassion and curiosity. This helps us train to become a more attentive listener with our family and friends as well.

Deep listening is also an opportunity to recognize what is happening inside and outside ourselves in the present moment. Sometimes a strong emotion may arise as we listen to another person's sharing. We can acknowledge the emotion, hold it gently, and steady ourself with conscious breathing. As we care for our feelings and emotions with compassion and curiosity, we touch freedom and stability in the present moment. This contributes to a calm, receptive, and safe environment for everyone in the Sangha.

5. Pause and enjoy 3 mindful breaths between sharings

Sharing is the fruit of our practice, a gift from the heart. It's helpful for the atmosphere of Dharma Sharing when we take three mindful breaths before speaking, to allow time for the previous person's words to be fully received and to feel gratitude for their contribution.

If we are in a hurry to share, we pause and breathe to calm ourselves. It's often helpful for us to wait until our rushing energy subsides before we speak.

6. Practice loving, mindful speech and watering positive seeds

As we address the Sangha, we practice loving, mindful speech and watering positive seeds. We share from the heart in a way that benefits others as well as ourselves. For example, we can speak with kindness, in a voice that is clear and loud enough for everyone to hear. We can connect by smiling and making eye contact every now and again. We all benefit from hearing each other's insights and experience of the practice and seeing the warmth of a smile.

We are aware that the knowledge we possess is not changeless, absolute truth. We keep this awareness while we speak so that we are not caught in our ideas and opinions, but rather humbly offering the best of ourselves. We try to speak in a way that is truthful, kind,

and waters positive seeds in others. We always do our best to aim toward reconciliation, love, and understanding to give people hope and happiness.

Please be mindful and refrain from speaking on behalf of a whole group or expressing assumptions about the experience of others.

7. Address the whole Sangha and try to be succinct

Whatever we share is for the benefit of all those present; we address the entire circle so that everyone is included and feels a sense of belonging. We avoid one-on-one conversations and cross-talk. If we ask a question, we ask the whole group and if we answer a question, we speak to the whole group and not just the person who asked.

Keep in mind that we may not have our question answered right away. Another topic may be addressed first and/or others may not feel ready to respond to a question at the moment it's asked. Ideally, if a question hasn't been addressed, the facilitator will assure the group that the question has not been forgotten.

8. Avoid giving advice

If answering a question, speak from experience. Usually we avoid giving advice, even if it is asked for. However, if someone asks for advice and a practice that we've worked with comes to mind, we can share our beneficial experience with the group. We share our experience rather than telling them what they should do. In general, it is helpful to always use "I" statements rather than "you" statements.

9. Allow others to contribute before speaking a second time

If we tend to speak often, we may "step back" from time to time to make space for others to share. If we tend to be silent, we may try to "step up" and bring ourselves into the circle. It's best to refrain from speaking a second time until everyone who wants to speak has had an opportunity to share. This way we can benefit from the collective wisdom.

We do our best to speak mindfully, not too much and not too little, sharing the essence of what we want to convey, being mindful that others may also want to share.

Near the end of our time together, the bellmaster may offer an opportunity for those who have not spoken to do so if they wish. It's also a time that they may address any unanswered questions.

10. Support the Sangha by nurturing a welcoming and safe space for all

The Dharma Sharing facilitator's role is to nurture a welcoming and safe space for all, to encourage trust, and to protect individuals and the community from harm. It's up to all of us to do our part to help the community "flow as a river."

If something happens that may disturb the peace and harmony of individuals in the Sangha, the facilitator may intervene by inviting the bell and asking everyone to enjoy their breathing for a moment. After this pause, the facilitator may share what arose in them in response to what was said or done and invite others to compassionately share their experience and reflections.

It's natural that there will be times when our words and/or actions are misaligned with the Dharma Sharing guidelines. The facilitator may use this opportunity to gently and skillfully remind the community of our guidelines.

When seeds of discomfort are watered during Dharma Sharing, the facilitator may invite practitioners to see discomfort as an opportunity to practice deeply, increase understanding, and strengthen relationships.

Sometimes a person may intend to say something positive and nourishing, but another person may not experience it that way. When a person in the community speaks up to share a hurt or discomfort with us, it's best to apologize for our unskillful words and acknowledge that they had a harmful impact. We listen, first and foremost, in order to understand and to relieve their suffering, not to defend ourselves. Focusing on and defending our intent can be more harmful than the initial interaction.

"When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. That's the message he is sending."

- Thich Nhat Hanh

In general, it's not ideal to publicly rate another person's sharing, either by praising or disparaging it. Lavishing praise on another person's sharing sometimes makes others feel uncomfortable, and disparaging almost certainly will. We can refer briefly to an earlier sharing without judging it positively or negatively.

When referring to others, we do not assume their race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. If we wish, we may share the pronouns that reflect our gender with the community. In the Zoomdo, we can add our pronouns after our name to show our support and remind the group that someone's gender identity may be different than what we might assume.

Addressing people by their preferred pronouns is a simple way to show that we care and respect each other's authenticity.

Like the Five Mindfulness Trainings, these guidelines are designed to protect us and point us toward the "North Star", cultivating love and understanding with clear and compassionate communication. **Dharma Sharing is not about perfection; we simply do our best.**

HOW TO USE THESE GUIDELINES

We invite you to look at our Dharma Sharing Guidelines with fresh eyes and consider the benefits of using them. We encourage facilitators to present the Key Elements at the beginning of Dharma Sharing groups - and as Sangha members, we too can be ready and willing to do so ourselves.

Offering the Guidelines in our email correspondence, on our website, and reviewing them at the beginning of our time together enables the facilitator to refer to them when a situation arises that could disrupt the harmony of the group. For example, by having stated at the onset that we intend not to give advice or interrupt each other, a facilitator is more able to *gently* correct this situation when it occurs by reminding the group of the Guidelines, thus protecting the group in a skillful manner. Doing so reminds us of our aspiration to listen deeply and to speak mindfully.

As we learn to speak about our happiness and our difficulties in the practice, we contribute to the collective insight and understanding of the Sangha. Our Dharma Sharing Guidelines can also be thought of as trainings that we can continue to learn and apply in all of our interactions, helping us cultivate compassionate communication wherever we are.

As we contemplate how to present and share our Dharma Sharing Guidelines in a loving and mindful manner, here are some suggestions:

- Add the Guidelines to our website.
- Add the Guidelines to our newsletters, especially invitations to weekly Dharma Sharing events and retreats. We may include the Key Elements in the body of our email or flyer with a link to the full text.
- Encourage new members to review the Guidelines before joining the Sangha for the first time to cultivate a sense of belonging and to minimize unskillful sharing and awkward moments.
- Remind the Sangha of the Key Elements each time we gather for Dharma Sharing.

- Offer the Key Elements in the chat box of our Zoomdo and include a link to the full details.
- Review and refresh these Guidelines from time to time during a Dharma Discussion.
- Consider opportunities to hear these Guidelines through the many voices of the Sangha as each person adds his or her special freshness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With gratitude and respect, we acknowledge that our Dharma Sharing Guidelines were inspired by and in many places transcribed directly from these wonderful communities and resources:

[The Order of Interbeing](#)

[Parallax Press](#)

[Still Water MPC Inclusive Community Committee](#)

[The Mindfulness Practice Community](#)

[Plum Village Sanghas](#)

THANK YOU.

We're honored to walk this path together.

A deep bow to you,

- Your Friends at Radiant Light Zen