



## Zen Heart Sangha

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### **The Council circle**

The council circle is a practice that originated in the spirituality of the Native American Nations of North America. It is a way to speak and listen, coming from a fundamental openness and connectedness. It's a wonderful practice to explore and share together whatever lives within ourselves and within our community. It's a spiritual process that surpasses a conversation although that doesn't mean that the process itself and whatever is said need to be "holy" in any way.

It is an exercise in being spontaneous, direct, open and truthful. Of course, the fact that it is an exercise also means we are trying. We try to be open, spontaneous, aware, and we accept lovingly and without judgement that we don't always succeed. Or rather, we try that too.

In the Zen Heart Sangha we use the term Sangha Circle because the process is about the harmony that exists naturally between the boundless and non-knowing silence of open listening and the endless and continuously changing stream of sounds and words; in other words between form and emptiness.

The practice of the sangha-circle is based in two intentions which are:

- The intention to listen from the heart
- The intention to speak from the heart

The heart from which we listen and speak is not the heart that we often see as the opposite of our head, our reasoning, logical, dualistic brain. The heart encompasses both "heart" and "head."

So, speaking from this heart can certainly include (among other things) expressing logic, reasoning, coherence, and explanation. It also includes emotions, rawness, deep vulnerability, incoherence, tears, grief and joy. And all that without needing any justification or explanation. And it also includes anything around and in between. The Heart includes all. It embraces.

The Heart of listening and speaking in the circle is without judging, without "knowing", unbound and beyond description. However we can describe it more or less as a deep silence in which form, thoughts, feelings and words can arise and spontaneously flow into the circle.

### **Listening from the heart**

The practice of listening from the heart is trying to listen as intently and openly as possible to what whatever emerges and enters the circle, and to try and be deeply present in this listening. Then we don't just hear the words of the other. We also hear what is being said "between the lines" and what is not being said. And we experience the unvoiced responses and reactions of the group as well as our own inner reactions and responses, our thoughts and emotions. We try to experience and appreciate, as best as

we can, everything and anything that arises both externally as well as internally.

### **Speaking from the Heart**

One of the most important aspects of speaking from the heart is to try and speak from spontaneity. That means we try to speak without rehearsing. We try not to plan ahead about what we want to say and how we are going to say it. We don't search for a subject, unless the circle has a theme. And we try to avoid censoring and sanitising our words. In practice this often means letting go of what we prepared. It's an invitation to let ourselves be surprised by the spontaneous wisdom that wells up within us when we try to be in contact with the heart. In a document about Noble Speech from Zen River Temple in the Netherlands there is a paragraph about the importance of listening even as we speak. This expresses, among other things, the importance of trying to remain in contact with the silence when we say the words that come up. The silence both carries and "fills" the words.

### **The "Rules"**

Because the circle is a place in which we want to be very open and vulnerable, it's very important that it is a safe place. We need a lot of safeguards to dare be unguarded, so there are certain rules that we maintain during the circle process. Those rules are as follows:

- The circle is created in a safe spot with sufficient privacy.
- The participants are placed in a circle and are peers. There is no hierarchy although often there will be a facilitator to guide the process.
- All participants need to be aware of the intentions of the process and of the rules. If needed, the intentions and the rules must be explained before the circle starts (preferably by a facilitator).
- When ready, the circle is opened in a formal way that makes it clear to all participants that from this point on the circle is open and the rules apply. This may be done by simply lighting a candle and maintaining a brief period of silence.
- From the start of the circle it must be completely clear who's turn it is to speak. Therefore we use a clearly identifiable token called "the talking piece" (like a stone or a stick). Whoever holds the talking piece is the only one who may speak. He or she can not be interrupted! Only the facilitator may intervene and then only if the rules of the circle are being broken.
- When you hold the talking piece, you need to be aware of the passing of time and the number of participants. Speak leanly and without digression and frills, but also without restraint and without suppressing what wants/needs to be said.
- When you have the talking piece you are of course invited to speak, but if it is silence that comes up, then that can also be shared in the circle. If that is the case, then also investigate if perhaps you are leaving something difficult or painful hidden in the silence.
- Do not speak about someone. Neither about someone present nor about someone not present in the circle.
- Stay as close to yourself as possible and preferably use the "I"-form. Stay close to your own personal experience and try to avoid generalities.
- Do not address anyone and do not comment on what was said before in the circle (although it's fine to find inspiration in what was said before).
- When the circle process ends, make sure to close the circle properly. This may be done by taking a few moments of silence, chanting together, putting out the candle(s), or any small ceremonial way to close.
- What is said in the circle, stays in the circle. It is deeply confidential and should not

be spoken about afterwards with anyone regardless of whether they participated in the circle or not.

There are some important additional points that are not rules, but which may be very important for the process.

- Allow yourself to be surprised by the wisdom of your own words as they appear.
- Let go as much as possible of your ideas and judgements about yourself and others.
- Open yourself to the wisdom and wealth of what the individual participants share and give in the circle. Also be aware of the wisdom and wealth of the circle as a whole. The circle itself is more than the sum total of all that is said and shared. The process itself brings wealth, wisdom, compassion, love, a sense of community, space and well-being to the participants, and so to all sentient beings.