

Dear SnowFlower Sangha Steering Council,

I am writing in response to the emotionally difficult events that have been occurring recently in our practice community. In the interest of depersonalizing and gaining deeper insight into these conflicts I have sought the counsel of senior teachers including Roshi Joan Halifax of Upaya Zen Center, Jack Lawlor, and Cheri Maples, each of whom have commented on it. This is very old territory, here. The Buddha was keenly aware that conflict is unavoidable in every group, and has offered general guidelines. These he called “The Seven Practices for Living in Community”. Thich Nhat Hanh offers “The Six Harmonies” for living in community. I have listed these at the end of this email for your reference.

Years ago we were few in number, without our own local Dharma Teacher, in a situation of relative stability. Now we are large, and growing. We are changing from an informal group to a formal group. Our Sangha has grown so much and so fast that it has been hard to keep up in terms of structure and procedures. Usually a practice community grows up around a guiding teacher who is present for it day in and day out. Presently, we must find our own way without an authority figure at the center of the sangha. So the emotional bloodletting suggests it is time for us to take this on directly, as a group. What is very clear to me is that we need to seek ways to establish “etiquette” for dealing with interpersonal conflict in SnowFlower.

I will now suggest a *rough draft* of what this could look like. We already have the Fourth Mindfulness Training regarding right speech. Here is my presentation of it, edited for the purposes of this letter: ...I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening.....to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people...I will speak and listen in a way that will help myself and the other person to transform suffering and to see the way out of difficult situations...I will not utter words that will cause division or discord...I will gradually transform my anger, violence, and fear... This has been brilliant expanding upon this precept. What I sometimes need is something more specific. Here is an example.

When you feel emotional pain arising out of a relationship within the Sangha.....

1. First [look to yourself](#) through your meditation practices of Stopping, Relaxing, Looking Deeply, Gaining Insight, and Healing. Search out the causes of your suffering internally to see if there is something to learn from the encounter. Be patient and very compassionate with yourself. Honor your emotional woundedness, and try to see the woundedness of the other. Allow wisdom to arise out of compassion for yourself and for the other, and finally for all beings.

2. If there is residue that is unresolved, [seek out a trusted friend on the path](#) to help gain perspective on your feelings.
3. If you still feel the need for deeper healing, seek out a [trusted senior practitioner](#) in the sangha. Discuss the situation with the aim of resolution and shared insight.
4. If you and the senior confidant agree on the need to go further, there are at least three paths:
 - a) With the fully informed consent of the other party, or parties, to the conflict, perform the formal practice of “[Beginning Anew](#)” as outlined by Thich Nhat Hanh.
 - b) With the fully informed consent of the other party, or parties, to the conflict, arrange to meet with the senior practitioner acting as a [witness](#) to the healing process.
 - c) With the fully informed consent of the other party, or parties, to the conflict, arrange to meet with the senior practitioner acting as a [mediator](#).
5. If there is still conflict, the issue can be brought before a chosen [council of the sangha](#), including a Dharma Teacher, for resolution.

The aim of this *or a similar process* is to preserve the sangha. We have all chosen to be together on this path of growth, knowing that being in community will involve conflict, hurt feelings, and difficulties. We receive a lot of love, caring, fun, and compassion from the sangha. We are in a community without a designated leader. This has its pluses and minuses, and sorting out just how much authority to confer upon Cheri and the senior practitioners is a related work in progress. This letter seeks to promote a sort-of “rule of law”, but it relies on there being recognized, responsible, willing senior members for it to be effective.

With a Deep Bow of Respect, Steven Spiro

From Roshi Joan Halifax:

To strengthen community according to the Buddha

Seven practices

Meet frequently in groups to study and discuss the dharma

Always gather and disperse in a spirit of cooperation and unity

Respect and follow the precepts

Respect and follow the guidance of elders in the sangha who possess virtue and experience

Live a pure and simple life, unswayed by desire and greed

Cherish a calm and peaceful life

Dwell in mindfulness to realize peace, joy and liberation and to become a refuge and support to friends along the path

Six harmonies

Sharing common space, sharing essentials of daily life, observing precepts together, using only words that contribute harmony and avoiding all words that can cause the community to break

Sharing insights

Respecting other's viewpoints, and not forcing another to follow your viewpoint

Keeping the precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not engaging in harmful speech, not taking intoxicants

Speech: abstaining from lying

Abstaining from gossip and slander

Abstaining from harsh language

Abstaining from vain and frivolous talk

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