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INFINITE CIRCLE  
A Plunge into Community Engaged Buddhism



bread loaf mountain  
zen community

Cohort 3 (2022)  
Getting Started Packet  
December 2021

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***THE ROAD IS YOUR FOOTSTEPS***

Wanderer, the road is your  
footsteps, nothing else;  
wanderer, there is no path,  
you lay down a path in walking.

In walking, you lay down a path  
and when turning around  
you'll see the road you'll  
never step on again.

Wanderer, path there is none,  
only tracks on the ocean foam.

Antonio Machado

## **Getting Started**

### WELCOME

Thank you for becoming part of our third practice community for *Infinite Circle: A Plunge in Community Engaged Buddhism*. I am personally very grateful that you have decided to take walk together in the dharma and Zen Peacemaker practice. My hope is that our together-practice benefits many beings.

This introduction will outline the overall objectives of our program and the expectations we have of participants. I ask that you read in before our first meeting and please do not hesitate to be in touch with me if you have questions effecting your participation in the program.

*Infinite Circle* program is intended to prepare you to practice with and serve those who live close to the place you call home. To that end, we are intentionally using the term "*Community Engaged Buddhism*" as a refinement of the more general idea of "Socially Engaged Buddhism." In defining *Community Engaged Buddhism*, we underscore the importance of practicing and working locally and practically. You yourself may be a caring neighbor, nonprofit worker, a grassroots activist, organizational volunteer, donor, board member, or a steady quiet presence, but you all share a common aspiration for the flourishing of everyone in your community, whether you define that geographically, by affiliation or identity, or organizationally.

By inviting those who feel lost and left behind into the embrace of community, we can realize the Vows of the Bodhisattvas and actualize the practice path of a Zen Peacemaker.

*"If you are unable to find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?" Dogen*

### PHILOSOPHY OF THIS PROGRAM

*"Buddhism is not concerned just with private destiny, but with the lives and consciousness of all beings...Any attempt to understand Buddhism apart from its social dimension is fundamentally a mistake. Until Western Buddhists understand this, their embrace of Buddhism will not help very much in the efforts to bring about meaningful and positive social change, or even in their struggle to transform their ego." - Sulak Sivaraksa*

Service to others is a path of awakening. Walking it, we learn a lot about ourselves and the world we are co-creating. Each of us in this program is interested in seeing the "true nature" of things. To do so requires practice and community. The practice path of service puts uses ways for us to decenter our cherished egos, replete with our greed, aversions, expectations, and willful shortsightedness. Looking up, we blink a few times and adjust our vision. What comes into view, instead of our self-serving interests, is the reciprocal dynamic that ties everything together. A person, a tree, a thought, a situation, a state of mind – none of it can exist on its own.

The view from here engages empathy, creativity, responsibility, and relevance.

This view-altering reciprocal dynamic is called Dharma. Every act we make, every word we speak, every thought we think is possible because of other lives, acts, and events. This means that our own lives and actions produce effects so far reaching that we cannot fully see or imagine them. Realizing this shifts our sense of responsibility to take care of life. Zen, we say, is all of life.

This program is not meant to inspire you to charity. It is intended instead to challenge each of us to relinquish the boundary of the self-interested perspective to engage directly in relationship, responsibility, and relevance. We are cutting the strings to the self that are often attached to our actions. In my words, this is a kind of love beyond barriers.

We aren't calling this a training or study group. We already live in an insight-intoxicated culture where we sometimes believe transformation is about the eloquent words that we heard in a retreat, read in a book, or listened to in a podcast. There's no doubt that we benefit from teachings like these. But Zen is also and ultimately about embodiment. I interpret this as going beyond knowing, knowledge, and insight and into functioning more like jazz musicians, feeling into each new moment and skillfully improvising, making something artful with whatever (and whoever) comes along.

To do this well, skills are important. But the embodied practices of Not-knowing and Bearing Witness lead us to create

the music – the conditions for Loving Actions where “all suffering beings are liberated and brought to great joy.” This is what we say when we finish chanting the Sutra of Compassion each Sunday at Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community.

The Infinite Circle aims to create conditions for new, modern forms of practice to arise – forms and practices for our times. Living a dharma-rooted life in a money-driven world becomes a lens for us to see the ripples of social suffering as they arise in the contexts as varied and yet interconnected as race, gender, ableism, addiction, mental health, and the natural environment. We always start with ourselves, but we do not limit ourselves to exploring inner narratives. The hindrances that lead to suffering are not solely the domain of the individual. They are seated and reinforced within society and its structures.

In form and function, the Infinite Circle is not a conventional “training.” We do not rely on experts to download information to us, therefore there is no faculty. Instead, using readings, activities, and practices as points of departure we turn toward our own life experience – with all its wisdom, mistakes, understanding and compassion - to act as our guide. We think of the Sangha as the teacher. As one body is made up of many parts, we will learn and grow together. Haiku Master and Zen nun, Chiyo-ni, wrote:

*A hundred gourds  
From the heart  
Of one vine*

## Frameworks for the Program

A central piece of this program is to practice in the Three Tenets of Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Taking Action. Bernie Glassman Roshi brilliantly condensed the teachings of Zen into these three interrelated tenets, and I believe they continue to enrich us. We will add mind-heart training in compassion and resilience by utilizing the powerful practice of Lojong. Roshi Norman Fischer's Zen teachings on the Lojong slogans will also guide us toward love and resilience. Finally, we will use a practice of Dialogue to integrate what we are learning along the way.

Together, The Three Tenets, Compassion and Resilience Training, and Dialogue are the braided threads of practice for a life of community engagement and service to others. Here are descriptions of each of these arenas of practice:

### Three Tenets Training: Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, Taking Action

The Three Tenets are the foundational training of the program. They help us move beyond the horizon of "the self" and open our view, our creativity, and our lives. The Tenets will help us find freedom to explore the complexity of poverty-based suffering, become intimate with its causes, conditions, and impacts, and with the people experiencing it firsthand. We will also learn how to take relevant and healing

action to serve people affected by it and transform the systems that perpetuate it.

In practicing the Three Tenets we grow in open-minded caring attention, the capacity for equanimity and intimacy, and an approach to service that is based on fundamental equality and continuous learning. If your health permits, you will be expected to participate in Bearing Witness days, plunges, and retreats during the year. Bearing Witness is a fundamental and ongoing orientation of the program and a practice that unfolds gradually and continuously.

Another part of the Way of the Zen Peacemaker is to create projects on the ground. We see these projects as a ministry. Learning how to serve is the function of awakening, and social action in today's world parallels the historical practices of the Head Cook in the Zen monastery. We see social action as a modern and worldly expression of monastic training and practice.

Also, we value interspiritual inclusion. As a non-dual tradition, Zen is radically inclusive and can hold practitioners of world religions, indigenous and earth-based spiritualities. Interspiritual dialogue and formation are marks of the New Monasticism, which has influenced my thinking about American Zen practice, and is one of the hallmark aspects of the Zen Peacemakers.

### Lojong Training in Compassion as a Liberating Power

Shabkar Rinpoche, a Dzogchen master of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said this

to a disciple who declared that he had realized the empty nature of phenomena:

*Now I have some heart-advice to give you: a sky needs a sun, a mother needs a child, a bird needs two wings. Likewise, emptiness alone is not enough. You need to have great compassion for all beings who have not realized this emptiness – enemies, friends, and strangers. You need to have compassion that makes no distinctions between good and bad. You must understand that compassion arises through meditation, not simply from waiting, thinking that it may come forth by itself from emptiness.*

*Matthieu Ricard, trans., The Life of Shabkar. 2001. P 422.*

Lojong is a way to work explicitly on the cultivation of compassion and resilience in ourselves. We need this to care about people who are sad, angry, overpowered by addictions of all kinds, stressed and strained, fearful, arrogant, jealous, selfish, miserly, mean, etc. To care about them begins with learning how not to turn away from the pain of seeing that these things also reside in us. As practitioners, we endeavor to feel this pain knowing that it will soften and transform to make us more loving, more kind. It will also safeguard us from some of the dangers of working in places of extreme suffering such

as burnout, compulsive helping behaviors, and the inability to maintain healthy boundaries.

Roshi Norman Fischer has said that, while Zen is wonderfully direct and simple, there is a “serious weakness...[in] its deficiency of explicit teachings on compassion.” Zen exists within the Mahayana teachings which are completely framed around compassion and love, but “Zen assumes, rather than encourages compassion.”

This assessment rings true for me. Roshi Norman Fischer has encouraged us to use his book as we navigate the profound beauty of this practice. The Lojong slogans train the mind toward compassion in a cumulative way, methodically reorienting our perspectives, balancing reactivity, and mapping a new territory of love into our hearts. Compassion is a form of love. It allows us to empathize with beings in their suffering while working toward freedom from it.

## Dialogue

*Infinite Circle* uses small group dialogue process for integrating what we are learning. It is derived from the Way of Council. This practice fosters a contemplative way of listening and speaking to others that allows for processing knowledge and experiences in a safe and non-threatening manner. Dialogue process will be used consistently throughout the *Infinite Circle* study and practice program.

The process we are engaged in is not primarily about acquiring an academic or professional certification. Rather, we consider

the totality of the spiritual journey. Dialogue supports this process. What we are doing doesn't depend on books or spiritual reading but uses them and looks beyond them into the deepest expressions of the religious and spiritual dimensions of human life and service to others. We explore these dimensions in the context of relationship with one another, and in dynamic relationship to our living experience.

In Dialogue we listen and speak from the heart, we speak spontaneously, and we go to essence. But, in contrast to Council practice, we also dialogue across the circle and interact with each other's insights and questions as we circle deeper into inquiry. Our intention in Dialogue practice is to create a collegial, relaxed, and contemplative environment for an intimate group of practitioners, allowing for the most creative and satisfying dialogue possible.

#### THE PRACTICE COMMUNITY

As context, it is important for you to know that you are part of a larger community at Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community. In addition to the Infinite Circle, we have a residency program, a local and extended sangha of several hundred people, and we maintain several [service projects](#) in or own local community. These strands of practice are being braided together in ways that we hope model a path of Zen Peacemaker spiritual formation.

From diverse backgrounds and many places around the globe, we in the *Infinite Circle* will

gather as a community of practice who are engaged in spiritual formation. In doing so, we will encourage each other in the way of compassion, learn how to bear witness, and deepen our connection to neighbors who are otherwise invisible. In the spirit of Not Knowing and remaining open, we don't know exactly where this will lead each participant in the Infinite Circle or Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community. We hope that a culture of care will emerge in neighborhoods that have been abandoned and left behind by "mainstream" society.

Learning to be of service to others is the general goal. In whatever ways your service practice might evolve, bringing your experiences into this program will support the whole practice community. The practice community will be strengthened by your effort and willingness to share, and our hope is that it will become an important social network and community of spiritual friends.

Zen practice is nothing if it isn't about relationships. We need to model for each other the kinds of relationships we want to see and be a part of in the wider communities of our lives. The practice cohort will work at an intimate scale to highlight the relational aspects of our practice tradition. We expect that you will be committed to getting to know one another well and cultivate ennobling spiritual friendships. We will gather regularly as a whole cohort and in smaller groups for dialogue, shared study, bearing witness practices and encouraging one another.

Because we have a sincere commitment to keeping this program affordable and accessible necessitates that we make good use of virtual meeting spaces. Since the start of this program we entered into a time of pandemic, therefore it continues to make sense to do as much as we can online. While this medium poses certain challenges for relationship building, it also creates a new venue where we can get to know people from geographically diverse parts of the country and the world. It will be on all of us to find ways to make online learning and practice personal and intimate. We must have a shared commitment to lean into the sangha we are creating, and to communicate with one another between larger group gatherings. We will also gather for street retreats and sesshin, giving us the chance to be in the physical presence of one another at times throughout the year.

Many in the cohort are already feeding people, practicing hospitality, and cultivating a practice of presence in soup kitchens, social service organizations, churches, jails and prisons, and as engaged neighbors and community organizers. As the program evolves, we are welcoming people who are working in a wider variety of arenas (e.g., environment, race, gender, etc.) and at different levels of intervention (e.g., public policy, advocacy, education, medicine, etc.). It makes sense that this is happening. The living experience you bring to our discussions, whatever it is, is essential and will

enrich our learning community. While we will cover theoretical and conceptual topics, our main goal is to support your practice and your life of service to others.

In creating community together, we also need to watch for unhealthy exclusivity that may emerge. I once heard Bernie Glassman say that his entire practice was a process of learning how to expand the notion of who belongs in the circle. He sometimes called the circle, "the club." We can't really help being in clubs – these are the ways our society organizes itself. But we also have a responsibility to make all our clubs open to everyone. To welcome everyone one and reject no one. Our practice, therefore, is to support one another in going to the margins we have created in our personal, collective and social narratives in order to erase the margins and to actualize the infinite circle of belonging. We endeavor to create friendship in places where people have only experienced "services". We go to abandoned and forgotten places to bring into them caring a commitment to presence, joy, and generosity.

### **Balancing Study with Praxis**

Many Buddhist training courses emphasize the conceptual and philosophical, which is important. We will do some of that too. But the primary goals of this program are personal and practical. We ascribe to the belief that large-scale social transformation begins with the individual, and in every case is the result of many smaller local efforts enacted by loving, courageous, clear, caring,

skillful and persistent people. This program is designed to deepen an understanding of Buddhist teachings on social, cultural, environmental, and economic issues related to poverty and care, and to encourage each participant to engage the process of transforming the heart-mind, and to function practically in the community where you live your life.

*“Let things come home to your heart.*

*Let your heart go out to things.  
All through the day and night.”*

*Dogen*

### ***Preparing for our first session***

When we meet in January, we will have a small ceremony to open the gate of our practice. I will ask each of you to introduce yourselves. When you do, please **share your name and where you live, and any other personal information** you would like to share with the group. Also, please **bring a photograph of a spiritual mentor** from your life. It can be someone living or “gone beyond,” a conventional spiritual teacher or an unconventional one, a family member or a friend. You will have up to one minute to say some brief words about that person’s influence on your spiritual path.

For our schedule, please [visit the website](#).

**Out of respect for our group cohesion, we ask that you make every effort to arrive on time and plan to stay for the entire session.**



