

# Welcome to Kintsugi Sangha

Thank you for visiting the Kintsugi Sangha. We hope that you will come again and perhaps consider becoming regular part of our close-and-welcoming community. This brochure provides a brief description of what and who we are, how we conduct our meetings, and other useful things to know about us.

## What and Who We Are

“Sangha” is a Sanskrit word denoting a community of people devoted to a spiritual search. “Kintsugi” is a Japanese art of repairing broken pottery and may be extended as a philosophy of accepting and embracing, rather than hiding, what is imperfect or has been broken.

At the Kintsugi Sangha, we meet to explore the confusion, joy, and boundless opportunity of the human experience—always with an eye toward compassion, honesty, and humility. Our explorations take the form of meditation, sharing, and conversation that draws on traditional teachings of the Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhist tradition adapted to contemporary Western culture.

## How Our Meetings Are Conducted

Because we focus on the personal aspects of spiritual practice, we tend to take a light touch with regard to traditional Zen protocols and rituals; however, we do follow certain customs of preparation and practice for our meetings.

## Customs of Preparation

We have only two basic customs for preparing to meet together. One is to wear black or muted clothing to the meeting; the other is to remove our shoes before entering the meeting space.

### Wearing of black or muted clothing

The wearing of black or muted clothing—meaning modest clothing absent of bold colors, large logos, and the like—is a carryover from the traditional wearing of plain black robes during meditation. This tradition is rooted in the history of the original Buddhist monks, who gave away all their worldly goods and took a vow of poverty. To clothe themselves, they collected scraps of discarded fabric, sewed them together and used vegetable dye to imbue them with a consistent, dark color throughout the garment. Even today, for formal occasions, some practitioners still wear a wrap called a “kesa”—which is a Japanese word referring to a poor-quality black dye.

Beyond the obvious nod to tradition, we wear black and muted clothing to avoid drawing attention to ourselves during meditation, where even small things can become unintended distractions. (This is why we also silence our electronic devices.)

### Removing our shoes

We remove our shoes as a sign of respect for the meeting space. Traditionally, the feet are rendered bare, but many of us choose to wear socks—especially in the depths of a cold Wisconsin winter. We recognize, too, that some medical conditions require footwear to be worn at all times. If you have such a condition, please feel free to wear “indoor” shoes during the meeting.

### Customs of Practice

Our customs of practice may be generally thought of as consisting of two elements: the phases of the meeting itself and our general protocols.

### Phases of the meeting

Our basic meetings consist of four phases:

- group recitation
- meditation
- sharing (also called “checking in”)
- instruction (also called “dharma talk”)

In group recitation, we read out loud together from various writings related to Zen. During the meditation phase, we sit silently without moving for a time, then perform a walking meditation. In the sharing phase, we participate in what we call “check-ins,” wherein each member may choose to share some aspect of what is going on in his/her life. And in the instruction phase, the leader or guest teacher speaks briefly on a subject drawn from Buddhist teachings, followed by an enlightening discussion.

### Group recitation

The first several minutes of the meeting consists of group recitations of various short writings related to Rinzai Zen and our sangha. These writings are contained in a booklet of “sutras”—a Sanskrit word that refers to writings that reflect the teachings of the Buddha. The booklet that we use draws from the writings of both traditional and contemporary writers. It is not considered holy in any sense but is looked on as a type of study guide.

This tradition of group recitation harkens back to a time when few people could read and even fewer owned books, so that reciting texts out loud together served as an efficient way of spreading teachings and passing them down through generations. For our sangha, this practice is similar to group prayer or the singing of hymns—and you are welcome to join in or read along in silence, as you prefer.

### Meditation

The meditation phase of our meetings generally includes two forms of meditation: seated and walking. During seated meditation, we sit quietly in focused concentration with the goal of being fully present in the moment. During walking meditation, we walk in single file around the meeting space, slowly and deliberately, with the goal of experiencing fully each footfall.

### Sitting meditation

The sitting-meditation phase begins with the striking of a bell four times. As the reverberation of the fourth strike fades away into silence, we each settle into a relaxed posture of stillness that we attempt to maintain throughout the meditation period (typically 20 minutes).

Many practitioners begin this meditation phase by focusing on something in particular—for example: an object to stare at, a mantra or phrase to recite internally, a finger pose to hold, or their own breathing—paying close attention as they inhale and exhale. The idea is not to try to block out sensations and thoughts but to become aware of everything in and around you, including the thoughts and feelings arising from your own mind.

In this respect, the initial point of focus serves an entry point to meditation, not its end goal, and is meant to be used only until it can be let go of, at which point the practitioner can just sit quietly, immersed in the present moment. This state of mind represents a significant step toward a deeper awakening and insight into his/her own true nature.

With practice, the initial meditation that focuses on an object (called “dharana”) can lead to a calm, peaceful state of being present without a point of view (“dhyana”) and ultimately to “Samadhi,” a blissful state of non-focused awareness. All that really matters for the purposes of our meeting, however, is that you become as quiet as you can and have your deepest possible experience of silence.

From a practical standpoint, we recommend keeping your eyes fully open during meditation rather than half-closed, as is often depicted in the traditional Hindu images of the Buddha. Although eyes-open meditation offers more risk of distraction, it also makes it easier to stay present without falling asleep during extended sitting periods. (Drooping heads and snoring do not help the pursuit of deep insight.)

We also request that you suppress any personal tendency to fidget while sitting—which can be distracting to others, who are trying to achieve their own states of mindful stillness.

### Walking meditation

Walking meditation, also known as “kinhin,” is a common form of meditation that follows and complements seated meditation. In kinhin, the sangha leader begins walking, and the other practitioners follow him/her in single file as he/she leads them away from the meditation circle on a path around the meditation space. The intention is to walk slowly and deliberately, aware of every footfall and fully present, here and now.

In practice, please try to keep about an arm’s length distance between you and the person in front of you during kinhin. We recommend forming a fist with one hand, cupping it in the other, and letting them rest gently on your stomach, in a relaxed manner, as you focus on each step you take.

When the walking meditation is over, the leader claps two wooden blocks to indicate that kinhin has ended. The participants then follow him/her back to the meditation circle at a quickened pace (and in silence). When all participants are assembled at the circle, they bow and reset themselves in preparation for the sharing phase of the meeting, also referred to as the “check-in.”

### Sharing (Checking in)

One of the things that makes our Kintsugi Sangha unique is our regular practice of “checking in” with each other at the end of the meditation period. During the check-in phase of our meetings, each of us takes a turn sharing some aspect of what has been important in our lives since the last time we met. Participation in the check-in is entirely optional for both visitors and regular attendees alike.

The exact format of the check-in may vary slightly from meeting to meeting but typically involves the sharing of four things:

- our name
- our current emotional state
- the status of our daily meditation practice outside the sangha
- what has happened since we were last together that has affected us emotionally

Each participant shares for a few minutes, as the group listens silently, then finishes by saying, “I am in,” (*not* “Amen”) and bowing to the group. By proclaiming “I am in,” the participant is saying to the group, “The things that I have just shared are important feelings and resonant thoughts and encounters that I have brought with me to this meeting by virtue of the fact that I am here.”

The purpose of the check-in is not to lecture, teach, or offer advice to anyone else in the group; it is simply to share what’s going on in your life in an open, caring, non-judgmental environment. If you do choose to participate, you may find that the initial sense of being an outsider (which everyone feels at the beginning) may dissolve rather quickly as you experience the safe joy of opening up and finding yourself welcomed by our community. It is partly because of our practice of checking in with each other that many of us have formed strong friendships over the years.

The effectiveness of the check-in depends on the principle that our sangha is a safe space for sharing. Such safety requires that we maintain strict confidentiality among ourselves regarding personal information that others might share. You may feel free to share outside the group any insights that you acquire during a check-in—but personal information must be kept strictly within the group.

### Instruction (Dharma talk)

When everyone who wants to participate in the check-in has done so, we proceed to the “dharma” talk, a brief (10–20 min) lecture presented by a teacher—either the sangha leader or a guest speaker—on a subject drawn from Buddhist teachings. The canon of Buddhist literature is called the “Dharma,” a Sanskrit word meaning “key concept”—which is where this phase gets its name.

At the conclusion of the lecture, the floor is opened to discussion and response by anyone who cares to comment and participate. Typical responses can range from supportive to respectfully confrontational, depending on our individual reactions to the teaching. We encourage spirited discussion, even if it involves challenging the teacher, for the sake of deepening the understanding of everyone present regarding the nature of human existence.

### **Our general conventions**

Although we are not sticklers for form in our sangha, we do try to adhere to certain conventions regarding our rituals and manners of action. Some of them have to do with ceremonial elements; others pertain to personal conduct.

### **Ceremonial conventions**

Our ceremonial conventions involve the use of bells and clappers to signal significant moments in the meeting, as well as the use of incense.

#### **On using bells and clappers**

Long before the days of texting and email, sound-making devices like bells, gongs, drums, and clappers were often used as a means of communicating without conversing. In ancient monastery life, for example, long periods of time were spent in silence to allow for inner reflection, and bells were used to signal recurring events, such as the time to get up, the beginning and ending of a meditation period, or time to dine.

In our sangha, we carry on this tradition of ringing bells and using clappers to signify the start and end of various events at the meeting, such as the beginning and end of the seated meditation phase.

#### **On using incense**

In many cultures, the burning of incense has been used for thousands of years as a gesture of respect for important visitors. (Perfuming the air was more important before soap and daily showers became a common part of everyday life.) In our meetings, we integrate incense into our opening and closing ceremonies and also use it as a focusing tool during meditation, to help us stay present.

### **Personal-conduct conventions**

Our conventions of personal conduct are not numerous. They include only: bowing, sitting cross-legged on floor cushions, stepping out of and returning to the group, and remaining silent during pauses in conversation.

#### **On bowing**

Much of the ceremony of a sangha meeting is drawn from Japanese culture, which values politeness and often involves bowing—for example, as a way to say hello, goodbye, or thank you. This bowing is not a show of submission or deference to a higher power or authority. It is simply an expression of respect, similar to holding open a door for someone entering a room or building.

Consequently, some of our ritual conventions involve bowing to each other or the group. When we do so, we are simply declaring that those we bow to are worthy of respect, as are we. We also attempt to maintain eye contact with the other person(s) while bowing, to recognize publicly that we are equal.

### **On sitting cross-legged on floor cushions**

Since ancient times, the Japanese and Chinese cultures from which we draw some of our inspiration have sat cross-legged on floor cushions as an ordinary part of daily life. (Chairs were expensive, delicate, hard to transport, and used mostly by royalty or those with a high-ranking political office.) Even today, sitting cross-legged on floor cushions constitutes common, everyday behavior in Japan.

It is from this Japanese tradition that we derive our practice of sitting on floor cushions during our sangha meetings. However, we recognize that not everyone enjoys the leg- and lower-back flexibility that allows them to sit comfortably this way. If another manner of sitting on the floor cushion—or even sitting on a chair—allows you to sit pain free, then please feel free to do so. Enlightenment will happen regardless of what you sit on.

### **On stepping out of and returning to the group**

Occasionally, it can become necessary to step out of the group and return to it later—for example, if you experience a sudden coughing fit or feel the call of Nature. Our conventions for doing so vary slightly depending on whether the group is seated or engaged in the walking meditation (kinhin) at the time.

To step out when the group is seated, simply get up, bow to the group, and step away. It is not necessary to offer explanation for your departure. When you are ready to return, please bow and take your seat again with as little disruption as possible. (This is also how to join the group if you arrive late, after a meeting has already begun.)

If you need to step out during kinhin, simply step away from the line of your fellow practitioners, bow to the line, and walk away. (If you do need to leave the line, please try to do so at the beginning of kinhin, rather than near the end.) When you are ready to rejoin the line, stand with your hands in the prayer position at a spot where the line will reach you. When your original place in the line passes by, the person behind that place will slow down to create a gap for you; bow to the gap and retake your original position.

### **On remaining silent during pauses in conversation**

Silence is golden, so it is said—and we believe it. A great deal of information can be transmitted with a silent pause that would otherwise be lost if it were filled with idle chit-chat. Occasionally, a meeting will include long pauses in conversation that allow those present to reflect on something that has been said. To remain silent during such pauses is considered respectful.

## **Other Useful Things to Know About Us**

As long as you've read this far, we will mention a few other things to know about our sangha, including: our attitude regarding worshipping the Buddha, our approach to form, and the (very brief) journey toward feeling a part of our sangha group.

### On worshipping the Buddha

For many of the world's Buddhists, Buddhism is a devotional religion and cultural practice similar to Catholicism or Evangelical Christianity. In Zen Buddhism, however—which is the flavor practiced by our sangha—Buddhism is considered a philosophy of how to live, rather than a religion, and does not involve the worshipping of any deity or higher power.

Although we do employ ceremony and traditional teachings as a way of engaging the world, we do not worship anything or anyone, including the Buddha (whom we regard as having been simply a man—albeit an extraordinary man). As the Buddha himself once responded when asked about the afterlife: “I could tell you, but we have more important matters to discuss.”

The bottom line is that you are welcome to practice any religion (or no religion) and still be an active member of this sangha.

### Our approach to form

The customs and conventions described above may all be considered to constitute “form” for our sangha. Some elements of this form date back thousands of years; others are relatively new. In fact, the form itself is a dynamic thing for us, subject to change where necessary and appropriate.

Please be assured that, although we strive to adhere to the elements of form outlined here, we do not consider it sacred or capable of being defamed. It is simply the way we currently choose to conduct our meetings. Mistakes and miscues happen—oh, well. Our attitude is: “Strive for perfection, notice where you've missed the mark, put effort toward improving, and be okay with it all.”

### On the journey toward feeling a part from the group

Our sangha group first started meeting in 2014, and some of its members have attended since its inception. Over time, it has grown to become a safe space where its members support and care for each other, and many have formed strong friendships.

As a first-time visitor, you may feel as if the group is so tightly knit as to be impenetrable. In fact, quite the opposite is true. We strive to welcome newcomers into our fellowship without pushing or proselytizing in any way. For that reason, we invite you to return and sit with us again. By doing so, you may find your natural sense of being an outsider (which everyone feels at the start) dissolving and a sense of belonging rising to take its place.

We look forward to that.

### Final Thoughts

If you have any questions that have not been addressed in this brochure, please feel free to contact our sangha leader, Roshi Erich Moraine at [emoraine108@gmail.com](mailto:emoraine108@gmail.com) to arrange for a conversation in person or via phone.