

# *Branching Streams 2023 Gathering*

Hosted by Santa Cruz Zen Center  
with support from Ocean Gate Zen Center and Monterey Bay Zen Center

Villa Maria del Mar  
Santa Cruz, CA  
September 18-21, 2023



# Reflections on The Gathering

**1. Changes in our world - including a global pandemic, virtual and digital communication, ongoing human rights and ecological crises - require new intergenerational and culturally diverse leaders bringing new ways of learning and leading to our SFZC-affiliated Branching Streams Sanghas.**

**2. Inclusive and widely-representative governance is essential to supporting Sangha well-being, wisdom and compassion**

**3. Residential training centers and lay practice groups have much to share and learn from cross-pollination and building relationships.**

**4. In-person and virtual practice opportunities are both critically important to continue the practice of inclusion and the support of *all* Sangha members.**

**5. Honoring our Ancestors and welcoming newcomers deepens our continuous practice of Branching Streams.**

***Read this report to learn about our process and the vision of Branching Streams that is evolving from this gathering!***

# Summary

The 2023 Branching Streams Gathering was different from all the previous gatherings. We had a new format that required everybody's involvement. It was a welcome change and an overall success based on the participants' enthusiastic feedback.

"This year's gathering was the best yet, a breathtaking exchange of questions, ideas, and aspirations," wrote Ryushin Andrea Thach in the Berkeley Zen Center November-December Newsletter.

We tried the [Open Space](#) approach to meetings. It encourages self-organization, collaboration, the sharing of ideas, and the spontaneous creation of a conference agenda.

Together we explored the theme of this year's gathering: "Transitions" - transitions in Branching Streams sanghas and San Francisco Zen Center as they enter a phase of leadership and generational change, transitions in our sanghas and the world after the unprecedented global pandemic, transitions in close relationships and families.

Two full days of the program were created through a process in which the facilitator guided the participants in planning the sessions together in the first hour of each day, creating a full agenda of concurrent breakout sessions designed by and for the participants. Jon Voss, board and sangha member of Mid City Zen and Senior Strategist at [Shift Collective](#), served as the facilitator, bringing over ten years of experience organizing and facilitating these meetings all around the world.

The more than 30 breakout sessions helped us understand what is alive for the sanghas who were there and learn about each other's visions, challenges, and ways to operate.

Among the topics discussed were:

- The future of Zen
- Financial models to support centers
- How to make zen practice relevant for young people
- Development and support of sangha leaders
- Conflict resolution
- Developing antiracist sanghas
- Supporting neurodivergent sangha members
- How we're including women, and the history of Buddhist women, in our Zen sanghas.

The Gathering was held at Villa Maria del Mar in Santa Cruz, a beautiful conference center overlooking the ocean. The sound of the waves was the perfect background for morning zazen. And the dolphins became the muses of our [collective poetry](#) session:

“I  
See out  
The dolphins swimming  
Up, breathe, dive, swim  
Broccoli, peas, carrots, eggs  
Ocean samadhi breathe  
Breathe, breathe,  
Aaah”

In addition to the workshops, the Gathering also had opening and closing sessions and ceremonies, morning and evening zazen and service, a poetry reading by Santa Cruz poet [Danusha Laméris](#) and a “No Talent Show.”

The idea of Branching Streams, dharma centers and sanghas affiliated with San Francisco Zen Center in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, grew out of the first Tassajara alumni reunion in 1986. The following year there were 15 sanghas affiliated with SFZC. Now, nearly four decades later, there are over 70 centers and sanghas in the Branching Streams network. They are all united by Suzuki's Roshi's simple directive: “Zen meditation practiced here.”

The 2023 gathering brought together 60 sangha leaders from 30 Zen Centers in the U.S. and Canada. It was an intergenerational conference, with 20 participants under the age of 50. We also had many first-timers, 37 in total. Taiga Ito from the Soto Zen International Center in San Francisco was among the attendees.

## *Feedback*

Seventy percent of the participants (42 out of total 60) filled out a survey at the end of the gathering. The feedback is invaluable as it helps understand people's experiences during the conference and gather ideas about what to do next.

Some takeaways from the survey:

- Survey participants unanimously supported the Open Space approach. Participants told us the format allowed for deep and honest connections, “made everyone engaged,” “was energizing,” “empowering,” “successful,” “effective,” “amazing,” “fluid, vital, adaptive.”

- The Open Space format was not without its challenges. A survey participant found it “very, very good” and, at the same time, “overwhelming in its relentlessness.” Others also said the format left them exhausted.
- Among the most meaningful things about the program for participants were “the energy and honesty it brought,” “moving the Suzuki lineage forward,” “many first timers,” “young and old together,” “discovering commonalities,” “the Dharma family feeling,” “connecting, connecting, connecting” and, of course, “the dolphins!!!”
- We heard great ideas for changing a few things in future meetings, like leaving more free time, having some physical activity as a group, more frame setting around the theme and better communicating and promoting our community agreements (we were utilizing those drafted by Brooklyn Zen Center in this meeting).
- Some would have liked more information on actual costs of room and board to adequately support our greater sangha. Branching Streams contributed \$7,896 from its restricted fund to cover the conference. Please see information about the budget below.
- Villa Maria del Mar with its ocean views, friendly staff and comfortable rooms was greatly appreciated. These are some of the things we heard from survey participants about the venue: “Absolutely beautiful and friendly,” “Perfect - loved location and facilities,” “Love it here,” “Couldn’t be better/superb,” “Five Stars/Beyond my wildest dreams”, “WOW!!” “Spectacular,” “Excellent/ the BEST!”

## *Visions of the Future*

As we reflect on our time together in Santa Cruz and our collective vision for Branching Streams, the words of Suzuki Roshi come to mind: “I think we must establish an American way of Zen life... I think one day you will have your own practice in America.” Suzuki Roshi trusted the young Americans he met in California in the sixties and their potential to find out the true way of life for human beings. He trusted Zen in America.

The 2023 Branching Streams Gathering in Santa Cruz showed that little by little, with patience and endurance, sanghas and Zen Centers all across the US and Canada are moving the Suzuki Roshi lineage forward and the beautiful practice he brought to America with its emphasis on direct experience of our Buddha nature and the power of community.

The gathering nurtured a wish to strengthen the connections between sanghas, to continue to learn from each other, and to meet more often. Going forward, this might take the form of regional gatherings every other year, Branching Streams retreat weeks at Tassajara or

elsewhere, or offering online training. It also showed that there is an emerging next generation of Zen students who may become teachers and leaders.

There was much exploration of how we might address together some of the major social shifts throughout society, as well as ideas around reaching new audiences, making inclusive spaces, and welcoming all to our practice.

There were many questions about the path toward leadership and the increasingly different routes presented by various dharma transmitted teachers and sanghas in our lineage. Participants explored intergenerationality in many different forms, from teacher to student, programs for young people, options for supporting our teachers, being with death and dying through training and rituals, and many more.

There were also two popular sessions that brainstormed visions of the future specifically, both in relation to Branching Streams, and exploring the future of Zen training in our lineage. Both of these sessions resulted in rich discussions and many ideas that we hope we can continue to explore in various forums.

Ryushin Andrea Thach summarized the Gathering this way: "We left not so much with information, but filled with ideas, intimate connection, and newly imagined ways forward to create Zen in America."

## *Location Selection and Local Logistics Committee*

Soon after the April 2022 Branching Streams Gathering in Austin, TX, Patrick Teverbaugh, co-guiding teacher of Santa Cruz Zen Center (SCZC), suggested that the 2023 Gathering be held in Santa Cruz. He met with the SCZC board who were in support. He and Tova Green, the Branching Streams Director, researched venues in and around Santa Cruz. They looked for a venue that was large enough to accommodate at least 60 people, prepared meals, and was easily accessible. Villa Maria del Mar, a retreat center overlooking the ocean run by Catholic nuns, met all their criteria.

In the spring, about six months before the Gathering, Tova and Patrick formed a local committee to work on logistics. SCZC's office manager, Sandra McCann and treasurer, Yaro Jane Arny, joined Tova and Patrick for monthly Zoom meetings. They created a logistics timeline, developed the registration form and process, tracked registrations and financial contributions, communicated with participants who had questions, and organized volunteers. They also designed and printed programs and other materials and prepared packets for each participant. Patrick organized transportation to and from the airport and local overnight housing before and after the Gathering. He was also the liaison with the staff at Villa Maria del Mar, who were responsive and a pleasure to work with.

Both SCZC and Ocean Gate Zen Center, located close to the Conference venue, hosted receptions and tours of their practice places following the Gathering.

## *2023 Program Committee*

The Program Committee consisted of the Branching Streams Director and nine leaders of Branching Stream Zen centers from around the US and Canada. The Committee met monthly over the course of 12 months to organize the gathering, including deciding on the theme and the methodology. The Committee members also facilitated all of the different activities, ceremonies, morning and evening zazen and service, poetry reading, and the No Talent Show. We broke into subcommittees to plan ceremonies and the opening and closing sessions, as well as to draft communications.

- Tova Green, Branching Streams Director, San Francisco Zen Center
- Choro Antonaccio, Austin Zen Center, TX
- Teresa Bouza, Kannon Do Zen Meditation Center, Mountain View, CA
- Jaune Evans, Everyday Zen and Heart of Compassion, Pt. Reyes, CA
- Douglas Floyd, Ancient Dragon Zen Gate, Chicago, IL
- Reirin Gumbel, Milwaukee Zen Center, WI
- Michael Newton, Mountain Rain Zen Community, Vancouver, BC
- Inryu Ponce-Barger, All Beings Zen Sangha, Washington, DC
- Patrick Teverbaugh, Santa Cruz Zen Center, CA
- Jon Voss, Mid City Zen, New Orleans, LA

## *Budget*

### **Expenses:**

• Stay at Villa Maria del Mar, 3 nights, all meals for 60 people	27,945
• Honorarium for poet	200
• Airfare for facilitator	520
• Printing and supplies	755
• Refunds and Stripe fees	2,059
• Miscellaneous	<u>400</u>

<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>32,608</b>
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### **Income:**

• <b>Registration and contributions from Sanghas</b>	<b>24,712</b>
• <b>Balance contributed by Branching Streams restricted fund</b>	<b>7,896</b>

<b>Total</b>	<b>32,608</b>
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# Appendix A.

## Full list of breakout groups

	10:00 - 11:15 AM	11:20 AM - 12:30 PM	12:30 - 1:30 PM	1:30 - 2:40 PM	2:45 - 4 PM	4 - 5 PM
MAIN RM (PIANO)		Financial models to support Centers (large, small, big, massive) Jonathan		Intergenerational (Jonathan)		SANGHA
MARIE ROSE 2nd FL		Planning for Sangha leadership transition Jim H.		How to Move forward as a Sangha Don Geigay		
MEDITATION ROOM 2nd FL	Did I do a Practice Period? Elliot			Meditation practices in our sangha has		
DINING 1 (JUICE)	KEIZAN ZENJI Taiga	Welcoming People to Practice Sherry & Sherry		What is the Sangha in the Sangha?		SHORTS
DINING 2 (CORNER WINDOW)				WHAT IS THE SANGHA PRACTICE IN SMALL TOWNS? CAROL		
DINING 3 (COUCH AREA)				ANTIRACIST SANGHA ? .. !		
JOSEPHINE HOUSE (Behind the house)	BODHISATTVA PRACTICE Lay and Monastic East West North South JAMES	SANGHA PRACTICE Patrick & Scott				
BEACH Garden	How to Make/Form Zen Practice Relevant for Young People YOUNG PEOPLE	How Do We Meet the Climate/Env Justice Crisis with Practice?		How are we including laypeople & women into Zen? - Blake	Form is Transition - Transition is Form - Blake	

This is what the organizing grids look like. This photo is of Day 1 and has meeting rooms listed on the left axis and time slots along the top. Participants would write their session idea on a large post-it note and put their name on it (as they take responsibility for hosting the breakout), and then put it on a place and time slot. Often as people add to the grid, people may combine sessions or rearrange them according to various needs of the participants.

## Day 1

### 10-11:15am Workshops

- Did I Do A Practice Period?
- Keizan Zenji
- Bodhisattva Practice, Lay and Monastic, East West North South
- How to Make/Form Zen Practice Relevant for Young People?

**11:20-12:30 Workshops**

- Enunciating The Path of Practice, Competencies and Curriculum, Future of Zen Training
- Planning for Sangha Leadership Transition/ Development & Support of \_\_\_\_\_ Sangha Leaders
- Welcoming People to Practice
- Sangha Practice
- How Do We Meet the Climate/ Env Justice Crisis With Practice

**1:30-2:40pm Workshops**

- Financial Models to Support Centers (large, small, big, massive)
- Technology in the Zendo
- What is Residential Practice in Small Temples?
- Antiracist Sangha
- How Are We Including Histories of Women Into Zen?

**2:45-4pm Workshops**

- Intergenerational
- How to Move Forward As A Sangha
- Mental Health & Addiction Issues In Our Sanghas
- Fulfillment of Lay Practice
- Form is Transition, Transition is Form

**Day 2****10-11:15 Workshops**

- Making Practice Accessible
- Women, Power (and where do you change your robes?)
- Sewing Teacher Forum
- How to Pay For Our Teachers, What Should We Pay Our Teachers?
- Art & Imagination As Teacher in Times of Change

**11:20-12:30 Workshops**

- Conflict Resolution with Conflict Avoidant Folks
- Transitions in Close Relationships and Family
- Supporting Neurodivergent Sangha Members
- Kinship of All Being: Reading, Writing & Ritual to Honor Our Interbeing

**1:30pm-2:40pm Workshops**

- What's Your Vision for Branching Streams in the Next 2/5/10 Years
- Is Tassajara Required? Or: paths for new priests, lay entrustment, and dharma transmission in 2023 and beyond

**2:45-4pm Workshops**

- Old Age, Sickness & Death: Options, Rites & Rituals
- Relational Rehab: practices to support (re)connection
- Staff/Teacher Burnout

# Appendix B

## Full schedule

### Day 1, Monday Sept 18

- 4-6pm Arrival and registration at Villa Maria del Mar
- 6-7 pm Dinner
- 7:30 - 9pm Opening Gathering in Seaview Room

### Day 2, Tuesday Sept 19

- 6:45 - 7:30am Zazen and service (zendo attire)
- 8:00 - 8:45 Breakfast (coffee/tea and snacks available throughout the day)
- 9:00 - 10:00 Organizing Session (see website for more information about the meeting structure)
  - 10:15 - 11:15 Break out Session 1
  - 11:15-12:30 Break out Session 2
- 12:30 - 1:15 Lunch
  - 1:30-2:45 Break out Session 3
  - 2:45-4:00 Break out Session 4
  - 4:00-5:00 speed talks (each sangha will have a chance to give a 2 min or less update describing recent news and events in their community. This is meant to be a quick, fun, informal and informative way for us to hear from each sangha that wants to share)
- 5:15 - 5:55 pm Evening zazen and short service (informal dress)
- 6 - 7pm Dinner
- 7:30 - 8:30pm Poetry with [Danusha Laméris](#)

### Day 3, Wednesday, Sept 20

- 6:45 - 7:30am Zazen and service (zendo attire)
- 8:00 - 8:45 Breakfast (coffee/tea and snacks available throughout the day)
- 9:00 - 9:45 Organizing Session
  - 10:00 - 11:15 Break out Session 1
  - 11:15-12:30 Break out Session 2
- 12:30 - 1:15 Lunch
  - 1:30-2:45 Break out Session 3
  - 2:45-4:00 Break out Session 4
- 4:00-5:00 Closing Circle (end of open space portion of Gathering)
- 5:15 - 5:50 Evening zazen and short service (informal dress)
- 6 - 7 Dinner
- 7:30 - 8:30pm No Talent Show

#### **Day 4, Thursday, Sept 21**

- 6:45 - 7:30am Zazen and well-being/memorial service (zendo attire)
- 7:30 - 7:45am group photo in zendo attire
- 8:00 - 8:45 Breakfast
- 9 - 11:45am Closing Activities.
- 12 - 12:45 Lunch
- Departures and checkout by 2pm
- 1:30 - 4:30 Receptions at Open Gate and Santa Cruz Zen Centers