

2025 Branching Streams Gathering Report

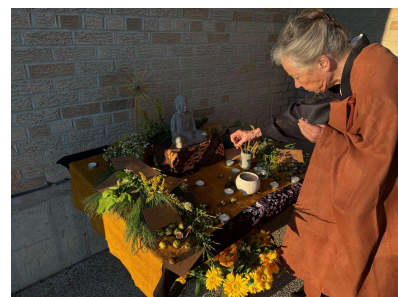
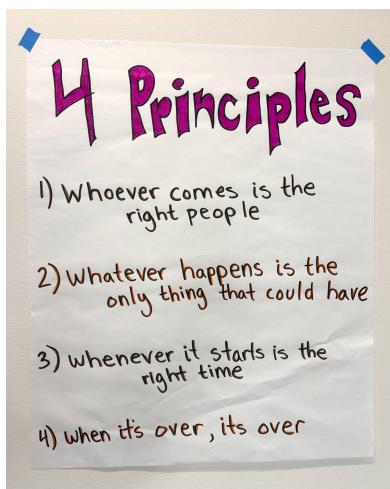


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Notes from the co-facilitators

I felt a deep sense of kinship with the mahasangha, or my extended dharma family, after the 2025 Branching Streams Gathering held at Loyola University's retreat center outside of Chicago. Our theme was: BRIDGING + BELONGING: Living a Zen Life in the Midst of Conflict.

This was my second gathering. This time, I had the opportunity to experience it from the inside as a member of the Program Committee and as a [first-time] facilitator of the Open Space Technology method for organizing conferences where participants self-organize to create and manage their own agenda.

Along with co-facilitator Erin Garber-Pearson, we worked together to create a supportive space where participants felt free to offer topics that mattered to them. For 2 days, participants collaboratively created our schedule, generating breakout groups based on topics + questions that were alive and relevant for the group with the theme in mind. It was a valuable time of deep listening and learning from my Zen community—which included the plants, trees, and sandhill cranes who live on the grounds of the retreat center.

Connections to the mahasangha extended beyond the gathering. The Open Space method inspired the Director of Brooklyn Zen Center to design an event for her sangha using that format. She reached out to Erin and I for guidance in Open Space facilitation. Jiryu's breakout session and presentation based on his recently published collection of Suzuki Roshi talks, *Becoming Yourself*, inspired Richmond Zen's Precepts Study Group that Fall. And the everlasting bond inspired Tova to embark on an east coast Dharma road trip with her student, Senji, bringing her through Chapel Hill, NC; Richmond, VA; and Washington D.C., where she offered Dharma talks and dokusan. Although the gathering meets every two years, it inspires innumerable connections in between. — Blythe King

I'm so grateful to have been a participant and organizer at Branching Streams. It's rare that people listen so well or navigate different views with such curiosity. Folks didn't always agree in our breakout groups and I felt trust in that honesty. As a new participant and organizer, I felt welcomed and connected to the legacy of the Zen tradition. Also, the "no talent" show was the most talented lack of talent I've ever seen! I left exhausted and full of hope for the practice and for what humans can be.

- Erin Garber-Pearson

Executive Summary

The 2025 Branching Streams Gathering surfaced a central question: **How can Zen sanghas remain grounded in traditional practice while responding skillfully to contemporary social, political, generational, and institutional realities?**

Across 30 breakout groups, participants explored tensions between form and adaptation, refuge and action, individual conscience and institutional voice, inclusivity and harmony, leadership and shared power. There was broad agreement that:

- **Zazen and ritual remain foundational**, even as sanghas expand into engaged, trauma-informed, hybrid, and socially responsive expressions.
- **Institutions must move carefully in political matters**, supporting individual action while maintaining unity and clarity of roles.
- **Leadership transitions, generational change, and governance clarity are critical for long-term sustainability.**
- **Trauma-informed, inclusive, and caregiving-aware practice is essential** for the health of modern sanghas.
- **Hybrid practice and online participation are here to stay**, requiring intentional integration.
- The work ahead involves **maturity in Bodhisattva Vow**, skillful communication, shared leadership, and deep listening.
- **Dialogue and listening are consistently more effective than declarations.**

2025 Program Committee

The Program Committee consisted of the Branching Streams Director and representatives from a variety of Branching Stream Zen centers from around the US and Canada. The Committee is intentionally an overlap of members from the Branching Streams Advisory Panel, people who have been on the Program Committee in the past, and new members to the Committee (not part of the Advisory Panel). This helps give us a variety of input while also passing on lessons learned from year to year. 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.

Special thanks to the 2025 Planning Committee:

Tova Green - SFZC and Branching Streams Director
Erin Garber-Pearson - Milwaukee Zen Center - co-facilitator
Douglas Floyd - Ancient Dragon Zen Gate
River Shannon - Mountain Rain Zen Community
Blythe King - Richmond Zen Center - co-facilitator
Inryu Bobbi Ponce-Barger - All Beings Zen Sangha
Michael Shinmon Newton - Mountain Rain Zen Community
Paula Chiplis - All Beings Zen Sangha
Shoryu Chris Leader - All Beings Zen Sangha

And to the local organizing (LOCO) committee that coordinated the logistics:

Paula Lazarz - Ancient Dragon Zen Gate
Tova Green - SFZC and Branching Streams Director
Reirin Gumbel - Milwaukee Zen Center
Douglas Floyd - Ancient Dragon Zen Gate

Topics & Main Discussion Points

We once again utilized Open Space Technology methodology for the gathering, which involves the participants coming up with their own ideas for sessions, perhaps combining with others, and taking the responsibility of sharing the session idea and taking notes for others to see (if they so choose). The following themes arose across the two days of sessions, as summarized and anonymized by Chat GPT based on actual notes from the convenings.

	Breakout Group #1 10:05 - 11:20am	Breakout Group #2 11:30am - 12:30pm	Breakout Group #3 2:40 - 3:50pm	Breakout Group #4 4:10 - 5:10pm
GOLDENROD (outdoors #1)	Communication structures for conflict - Mark Hostage Situation Greg		BRINGING ZEN TO A COMPLETELY NEW PLACE - HOW TO START TERESA	
LILYPAD (outdoors #2)	RELIGIOUS FREEDOM MRYU Separation of Church & State TILDE		RACE PETER	
GATHERING (main room)	Building the culture of the future practice and building with others Linda Integrating and accepting for social activism Dana Engaged Buddhism Weaving practice and justice work Tilde	NeuroDiversity Greg, Ahtis, Howard	LUNCH 12:30-1:30	Zen Board Conflict TILDE
Sycamore (room 151)		GAZA + GENA SIDE ROOM	Adapting to Generational Changes Linda Adapting to Generational Changes Linda	Writing Tava Postponed to tomorrow
Maple (room 146)	TALKING W Making visible what has been overlooked and therefore not included Tilde	Continuing in the absence of the founder Greg	LUNCH 12:30-1:30	CLOUD + GROUND DIFFERENCE + SIMILARITY
Linden (room 145)			Fundraising Bill Owens	TRAUMA informed Zen - River Practice w/ every body, every mind, every heart

Day 1 breakout groups

	Breakout Group #1 9:45-11am 9:45-11am	Breakout Group #2 11:10-12:30 11:10-12:30	Breakout Group #3 2:40-3:50pm	Breakout Group #4 4:10-5:10pm
GOLDENROD (outdoors #1)	Making space for Intensive Caregiving - MK			TREE CEREMONY for all Beings Steve + Janne
LILYPAD (outdoors #2)	Connection thru Zen & Ritual - DAN	Practice & Partners + & - Michael	REMEMBER FOR FORGET PROCBOTS JIN	Make a festive outdoor altar for the Equinox Ceremony - Rhyth
GATHERING (main room)	Bridging the gap between practice and teaching work engaged Buddhist activity Linda Integrating and accepting not Social activism Danne Engaged Buddhism Weaving practice and justice work		Role of teacher in Engaged Buddhism Linda	WORK PETER
Sycamore (room 151)		Writing Tova	PRISON DHARMA PRACTICE Cullen & Tricia	Residential Practice small med. scale Kara
Maple (room 146)		Visioning, inspiring, actualizing. Helenko		MAPPING CIRCLE OF ZEN CENTERS JON
Linden (room 145)		TRANSPARENCY in communications - Kristen		

Day 2 breakout groups

1. Engaged Buddhism & Role of the Teacher

Core Question: How can sanghas respond to suffering and injustice while maintaining harmony and integrity?

Key Themes: Refuge ↔ Social Action Continuum

Participants explored engagement as a spectrum:

- Silent sitting
- Listening circles
- Ritual and ceremony
- Service (meals, sanctuary support)
- Public witness
- Civil disobedience

Zazen itself was often described as a political or ethical act.

Political Complexity in Sanghas

Examples discussed:

- Gaza and genocide
- Cease-fire sits
- Trans rights
- Immigration sanctuary work
- Environmental action

Key distinctions included:

- Policy critique ≠ prejudice (e.g., anti-Israel policy ≠ antisemitism)
 - Supporting suffering without deepening division
 - Holding grief collectively
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Institutional vs. Individual Action

Strong consensus: Institutions should act carefully; individuals should act freely.

Possible models:

- Separate social action groups
- Listening circles
- Optional participation structures

- Non-partisan institutional messaging

Some issues (e.g., LGBTQIA+ inclusion, environmental care) were seen as easier for institutions to support publicly.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers hold unique influence and responsibility.

Guidelines discussed:

- Name injustice without partisan advocacy
- Avoid using the sangha as a political platform
- Encourage dialogue rather than direction
- Support individual engagement
- Avoid coercive authority

Key tension: Leadership silence vs. leadership influence.

What Is Working

- Listening circles
 - Sanctuary exploration
 - Climate and justice groups
 - Public sits
 - Letter-writing campaigns
 - Ritual-based responses to grief
-

2. DEIA, Religious Freedom, & Being More Welcoming

Core Question: How do we create sanghas where all beings feel welcomed, safe, and seen?

Inclusion & Racial Equity

Key elements:

- BIPOC-led affinity spaces
 - Leadership visibility challenges
 - Adapting traditional forms
 - Removing barriers without losing lineage integrity
 - Important insight: Tradition must be living—not frozen.
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Welcoming & Belonging

Participants highlighted:

- Deep listening as primary practice
- Small group conversations after services
- Clear signage and orientation
- Body language awareness
- Gradual introduction to forms
- Zoom as an inclusion tool

Welcoming was seen as both:

- A spiritual practice
 - A cultural competency
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Religious Freedom & Public Context

Concerns included:

- Christian nationalism
- Erosion of church-state separation
- Removal of DEIA protections
- Institutional vulnerability

Suggested responses:

- Form interfaith alliances
 - Remain visible
 - Invest in community welfare
 - Remember historical precedent
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Transparency & Trust

Important distinctions:

- Transparency is not full disclosure
- Information should be role-appropriate
- Trust emerges from clarity and relational honesty

Somatic awareness was emphasized: Truth is experienced, not just explained.

3. Trauma-Informed Practice, Accessibility & Caregiving

Core Question: How can Zen practice remain rigorous without causing harm?

Trauma Awareness

Major concerns:

- Harsh correction styles can retraumatize
- Meditation may trigger trauma responses
- Teachers need trauma literacy
- Key insight: Zen can heal—or harm—depending on structure.

Accessibility

Important considerations:

- Chairs, standing meditation
 - Pronoun use
 - Language sensitivity
 - Flexible schedules
 - Early morning practice accessibility
 - Core principle: Accessibility supports depth, not weakness.
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Mental Health Support

Recommendations included:

- Suicide prevention training (ASIST)
 - Mental Health First Aid
 - Peer support networks
 - Explicit permission to take breaks
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Caregiving as Practice

Caregiving was recognized as:

- A spiritual path
- A source of burnout
- A community responsibility

Support ideas:

- Dedicated care coordinators
 - Childcare programs
 - Meal support networks
 - Multigenerational programming
 - Online participation options
 - “This IS the practice” was a recurring theme.
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4. Governance, Conflict & Transparency

Core Question: How do sanghas hold conflict without fragmentation?

Common Conflict Areas

- Leadership transitions
- Belonging and identity
- Role ambiguity
- Power sharing
- Burnout

Governance Clarity

Recommended:

- Written role definitions
- Clear authority structures

- External review processes
- Communication protocols
- Key lesson: Unclear structure creates conflict.

Conflict as Practice

Frameworks referenced:

- Restorative dialogue
 - DARVO awareness: Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender
 - Proactive dialogue spaces
 - Timed conversation processes
 - Core shift: Conflict is not failure—it is information.
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5. Leadership Development, Succession & Generational Change

Core Question: How do we transmit the Dharma across generations?

Succession Planning

Strong recommendation: Every sangha needs a plan.

Best practices:

- Leadership councils
- Guest teachers
- Elders involvement
- Community surveys
- Slow transitions

Generational Tensions

Key dynamics:

- Younger leaders carry debt
- Different expectations about leadership
- Desire for more shared authority
- Economic barriers to clergy training

Mentorship

Critical strategy: Formal mentorship pathways.

Also emphasized:

- Lay leadership development
 - Youth programming
 - “Home-grown” teachers
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6. Practice Forms, Ritual & Sangha Culture

Core Question: How can forms support belonging rather than create barriers?

Ritual as Connection

Ceremony connects:

- Grief
- Ancestry
- Collective identity
- Narration and teaching reduce anxiety

Introducing Forms

Best practices:

- Gradual teaching
- Clear explanation
- Designated feedback roles
- Beginner orientation programs

Residential Practice

Key tensions:

- Home vs. monastery identity
 - Authority clarity
 - Perceived hierarchy of seriousness
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7. Hybrid Practice & Technology Integration

Core Question: How do we maintain connection across physical and digital spaces?

Challenges

- Technology complexity
- Sound quality
- Participation equity
- Online vs. in-person identity

Opportunities

- Greater accessibility
 - Wider participation
 - Financial sustainability
 - Community continuity
 - Key insight: Hybrid practice is permanent.
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8. Community Outreach & Social Engagement

Core Question: How does Zen show up beyond the zendo?

Service Pathways

Examples:

- Prison programs
- Meal service
- Immigration support
- Environmental action
- Mutual aid networks

Challenges

- Institutional barriers
- Volunteer burnout
- Safety concerns
- Key Insight: Service deepens practice identity.

Summary of Attendees' Feedback (33 Respondents)

The **2025 Branching Streams Gathering** was **highly successful**, with participants reporting strong satisfaction with the program, format, logistics, and venue. The most significant value identified was **deep connection across sanghas**, supported by an **Open Space format** that enabled real-time dialogue about pressing issues.

Participants consistently described the Gathering as **inspiring, energizing, and deeply relational**, strengthening the sense of a national Maha Sangha network.

Key Strengths

1. Strong Relationship-Building Across Sanghas

Most frequently cited impact

Participants highlighted:

- Meaningful connections across sanghas nationwide
 - Increased sense of belonging to the Maha Sangha
 - Opportunities for vulnerability, openness, and shared learning
 - Cross-generational relationship building
 - Strengthened collaboration and peer support networks
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2. Highly Effective Open Space Format

Participants overwhelmingly endorsed the **Open Space Technology format**.

Key benefits included:

- Participant-driven topics
- Real-time responsiveness to emerging issues
- Dynamic and engaged dialogue
- Opportunities for leadership participation
- Practical problem-solving across sanghas

Many participants stated this format should be **retained for future Gatherings**.

3. Valuable Learning and Exchange of Ideas

Participants gained:

- New approaches to shared challenges
- Awareness of how other sanghas adapt practice
- Practical strategies for governance, inclusion, and leadership
- Greater perspective on common issues facing Zen communities

4. Embodied Practice and Ritual Were Meaningful

Highly valued experiences included:

- Tree Ceremony / Autumn Equinox Ceremony
- Suzuki Precepts Presentation
- No Talent Show
- Guided outdoor walk
- Informal practice experiences

Primary Improvement Areas

1. Need for More Time and Spaciousness

Most consistent improvement request

Participants requested:

- Longer breaks between sessions
- More unstructured time
- More time for informal conversation
- Opportunities for reflection and integration
- Additional outdoor time
- Feeling rushed between sessions
- Limited time for movement or rest
- Desire for fewer or longer breakout sessions

Logistics/Operations & Venue

Registration & Communication

Overall Rating: Very Positive

Participants reported:

- Easy registration process
- Clear communication
- Strong logistical coordination
- Successful transportation support
- Appreciation for scholarship
- Natural setting and green space
- Quiet, reflective environment
- Private rooms
- Convenient layout
- Outdoor walking opportunities

Minor considerations:

- Distance from airport
 - Room temperature comfort
 - Desire for additional zazen space
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Equity and Accessibility Highlights

Participants expressed:

- Deep gratitude for scholarship availability
 - Appreciation for financial accessibility
 - Recognition of emerging younger leadership
 - Interest in continued diversity growth
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Cultural Impact

Participants described the Gathering as:

- Warm and welcoming
 - Supportive and inclusive
 - Creative and collaborative
 - Spiritually renewing
 - Energizing for leadership and sangha work
 - Many expressed strong gratitude and interest in future Gatherings.
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2025 Gathering Financial Report

Income	
Registration contributions	\$22,837
Donations from attendees	\$920
<i>Total Income</i>	\$23,757
Expenses	
Food and lodging deposit	\$5,019 (paid by Branching Streams)
Food and lodging balance	\$16,074 (paid by Ancient Dragon from registrations)
<i>Food & Lodging subtotal</i>	\$21,093
Shuttle buses	\$1,344
Snacks	\$201
Supplies	\$383
Miscellaneous	\$500
Total expenses	\$23,521
Scholarships & Travel Support (paid from Branching Streams dues)	14 total: range \$100 to \$650 + airfare = \$6,646