Therapeutic Language and its Use in Dokusan and Practice Discussions

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Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara, 2021

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Religious Studies

University of Virginia
May, 2023

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Abstract

This paper explores the vocabulary used during dokusan and practice discussions with Buddhist teachers who either are psychotherapists or are not psychotherapists. The language of Sōtō Zen teachers is to “just sit” through whatever problem, issue, or trauma that arises. The language has changed to “look at it,” “turn towards it,” “use your hands,” and “work from there.” This language was explicitly used by psychotherapists and Zen Buddhist teachers. However, the teacher who was not a psychotherapist also used the language of “name it,” and “see it.” This paper demonstrates that the language used in dokusan and practice discussions are evolving to be therapeutic. Secondly, I show that these teachers do not use therapy during dokusan or practice discussions. They instead focus on the teaching of the dharma. Thirdly, I demonstrate that Zen Buddhist teachers with a psychotherapeutic background have a better rapport with their students than traditional Sōtō Zen Buddhist teachers.

Introduction

The combination of Zen Buddhism and psychotherapy has grown in the last seventy years. Sects of Zen such as Sōtō and Rinzai don't agree with including something foreign in such an old tradition. It can be seen as a distraction from the primary goal of the practice. You could think too much and be outside of the present moment which is exactly the opposite of Zen's goal. Psychotherapy's goal is to improve your mental health and well-being by resolving emotional and psychological issues. They are specially trained to assess and diagnose and treat mental disorders. But, psychotherapy provides a more structured and evidence-based approach to addressing trauma. This combined with Zen can help overcome emotional and behavioral issues. Because Zen is centered on being in the present moment, combining it with psychotherapy can improve your self-awareness because you are exploring your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Zen has evolved many times as it moved from different countries and different eras. In the postmodern era of Zen Buddhism, select retreat centers have psychotherapists in their retreats because, for some people, meditation can bring up past trauma. Anxiety, depression, and trauma arise when attending long retreats, and having a psychotherapist present helps these particular people through their trauma and further develop their insight as the retreat intended. In 2021, a study conducted in the United States revealed that 30% of 434 participants had meditation-related adverse effects (MRAE).[1] "Traumatic re-experiencing" was a common MRAE.[2] This is evidence of why Buddhist centers like Spirit Rock have training specifically focused on Buddhist psychology and have classes to train teachers.[3]

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[1] Goldberg et. al., "Prevalence of meditation-related adverse effects in a population-based sample in the United States" *Taylor and Francis Online*, no. 3 (June 2021): 32.
[2] Goldberg et. al., "Prevalence of meditation-related adverse effects in a population-based sample in the United States," 32.
[3] "Buddhist Psychology Training Program with Matthew Brensilver, PhD — January - May, 2021 - Spirit Rock - An Insight Meditation Center," 2021, https://www.spiritrock.org/buddhist-psychology-training.

What elements change with the addition of psychotherapy in Zen Buddhist practice discussions? How are they changing? What is the language that is being used in these meetings? Are traces of psychotherapy being used? To find this out I held conversations with two former psychotherapists and Zen Buddhist teachers, Suzanne Kilkus and Flint Sparks, who combine elements of Zen Buddhist and psychotherapeutic philosophy. I contrast their conversation with Dave Cuomo, a Zen teacher, who does not have a background in psychotherapy. First, I will show that the language used during dokusan and practice discussions has changed with the addition of a teacher who was a psychotherapist. Second, the teachers instruct using the dharma and not psychotherapeutic therapies. Third, I will show that there are differences between the ways in which the students interpret a teacher's background in psychology. The students have a better rapport with the teachers that have a psychology background than the ones that do not.

I started this study because I wanted to know if therapeutic language would help in dokusan. I have been a practitioner since 2015 when I took a class dedicated to Zen Buddhism at Ventura College. I started attending sits at a local temple and eventually found Angel City Zen Center. I have practiced with both Rinzai and Sōtō Zen centers and in my experience they differed in the ritual of sitting zazen, but in dokusan it was the same, no therapeutic language. Throughout my experiences, I have never experienced therapeutic language during dokusan. I visit with a teacher twice a year, and they always answer my questions with answers from the dharma. Not once did I think that something was missing because they did not use therapeutic language. Going back to the dharma was satisfying for me and was a natural solution to my questions. After discovering teachers that combine psychology and Zen Buddhism I became curious because I had never experienced dokusan in that way. Mental illness has affected my family and so it has an everlasting role in my life. I wanted to conduct research that could help someone understand the limits that dokusan and practice discussions contain. My hope is that someone can make a better choice about what kind of teacher is right for them.

Elements of Zen Buddhism

In Zen Buddhism, zazen is a meditation technique that requires attention and devotion. Bodhidharma brought Buddhism to China in 479 CE transforming India's Dhyāna (meditation) into China's Ch'an.[4] One of the teachings of Ch'an focused on "entering through the Principle." That Principle is seated meditation with the intention "to cultivate a mind that is firm, ungraspable, free [from] all concepts and concerns."[5] Half a millennium later, Ch'an reached Japan, and Ch'an was transformed into Zen. In the thirteenth century, dissatisfied with Buddhism in Japan, a Zen student named Dōgen Zenji left for China in search of a "suitable teacher".[6] He found it in T'ien-t'ung Ju-ching. They agreed that Buddhism had become rampant with false teachings and this should be remedied by teaching zazen.[7] Returning to Japan, Dōgen taught Sōtō Zen Buddhism like his teacher Ju-ching viewing zazen as "the practice for one and all, irrespective of intelligence, education, rank, or gender."[8] Dōgen spent a decade building the first Zen monastery, and the rest of his life "producing its first Zen record, establishing its first enduring line of succession," and writing the largest "contribution to Zen literature" called *Shobogenzo* and popularized Sōtō Zen Buddhism.[9] Through the centuries monks have tweaked or created new ways of attaining the ultimate truth. For Dōgen, zazen was the Buddha way.

In *Shobogenzo*, Dōgen Zenji instructs his students to be in a quiet place and to use a thick mat to sit on. The room should be moderately lit with the temperature not being too hot or too cold. He emphasizes keeping the body and mind relaxed.[10] The mind must stay in the present moment, so let your thoughts go. Posture is important because when the mind goes the

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[4] Nelson Foster and Jack Shoemaker, *The Roaring Streaming: A New Zen Reader*, (New Jersey: The ECCO PRESS), 3.
[5] Nelson Foster and Jack Shoemaker, *The Roaring Streaming: A New Zen Reader,* 3.
[6] Ibid*,* 206.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid*,* 205-207.
[9] Ibid*,* 206.
[10] Kosen Nishiyama, *SHOBOGENZO the Eye and Treasury of the True Law,* (Mukaiyama: Nakayama Shobo Japan Publications, 1975), 50.

body moves. The goal is to be in the lotus pose which is where you are sitting on the cushion with your left foot on your right thigh and your right foot on your left thigh, but many sit in a crossed-legged position with feet alongside one another instead of crossing over. Another important aspect is having the hands in the cosmic mudra which consists of the palms facing up, left hand over right hand with the tips of the thumbs touching. Dōgen insists that the ears be even with the shoulders, and the navel is straight with your nose. The eyes should be open naturally. In Dōgen's view, "The form of your zazen should be stable like a mountain. Think 'not-thinking,' How? By using 'non-thinking.'" Dōgen's argument is that posture and the mind are connected. When the body is steady the mind can focus on being in the present moment which is experiencing.

The practitioner focuses on their breath taking care to come back to it when thoughts arise and distract them. The goal is to have the thought pass by. The practitioner notices them but doesn't cling to them. Imagine two open doors separated by a hallway. The thought enters through one door and out the other. The neurologist James H. Austin states, "It becomes a way of thinking, clearly, and then of carrying this clear awareness into everyday living."[11] In making this comment, Austin urges us to bring a sense of awareness to our everyday thoughts and actions. Zazen is painful. During a retreat, you could be sitting for six to eight hours a day. In this pain, students learn about themselves. The practitioner learns how to push through not only the pain but build discipline within themselves.

Once you get past knowing how to sit zazen and understand the basic philosophy, a practitioner begins to have questions. Students would think that sitting is easy, but it turns out it is hard work. The work is not only physical; the body straining to stay straight and the legs trying to stay awake. But, the mind begins to wonder and think about things that you have not thought about in years, or maybe it was something extremely recent. The point is that questions arise

[11] James H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1998), 57.

and students need to talk to their teacher. These meetings are called dokusan[12]. Dokusan is a formal session with a teacher who has had Dharma transmission. Dharma transmission is when a student becomes a Zen master. Dokusan implies “going alone to the high one.”[13] In other words, Zen believes that dokusan should be a meeting with a highly-ranked teacher and a student. You can meet with a head teacher called shuso or have a non-formal session called a private practice discussion with a senior assistant called a jissha or benji.[14] Dokusan is a discussion between teacher and student about zazen and what issues are coming up that are disrupting the practice. At retreats, practitioners sign up for dokusan if they have a question regarding their practice. Dokusan is a quick meeting, about ten to fifteen minutes. The question should not be expected to get a long philosophical answer. It is appropriate to bring up no more than two questions. The most popular questions are concerned with daily life. This would be in the realm of sangha practice which would focus on being around others that practice in your center.[15] After a student studies more, the questions turn to the teachings of dharma practice.[16] The focus here is to understand the teachings in everyday life and live by them. Once the teachings have been embodied, the focus on zazen or Buddha practice is the main focus.[17] The point of dokusan is to focus on the practice. It is not therapy. The Buddhist teachers make boundaries so that the students know that it is not a therapy session and they will be focusing on the dharma. These sessions are focused on zazen and what issues are occurring while practicing. The teacher should focus on the three groupings of the Eightfold path which includes right conduct, right discipline, and right wisdom.[18] The idea is that the session is focused on the practice. There is a ritual for entering and exiting dokusan. Here is a description by Zenkai Taiun M. Elliston, Roshi,

[12] Zenkai Taium M. Elliston, “*Dokusan & Practice Discussion*,” Mokurai Silent Thunder Order, last modified April 1, 2008, http://storder.org/dokusan-practice-discussion/.
[13] Mokurai Silent Thunder Order, “*Dokusan & Practice Discussion*.”
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

> One sits in the waiting area (or zendo) until hearing the double bell, and responds by ringing the smaller bell in the same way if one is provided. Rising from the waiting place, one enters the dokusan room quietly but quickly, bowing to the teacher either formally, in prostration, or informally, standing. The degree of formality is up to the teacher (when visiting, one should ask). After the greeting bow, one sits on the cushion or chair provided, making greetings and composing oneself, and a second bow with the teacher. This second bow marks the beginning of dokusan.[19]

Usually, the student brings up what is on their mind, and the dialogue begins. It is polite to wait until prompted by the teacher. If something is unclear, it is fine to ask for further clarification. When satisfied with the teacher's response, it is polite to say 'Thank you,' more polite to say 'Thank you for your teaching,' and the teacher will say 'May you be well,' or words to that effect. At this point, the student rises and bows before leaving, as well as bows at the door, to be extra polite.[20]

Note here the importance of the bells and bows. Two different bells cue you into the meeting and there is a certain number of rings to listen for. The student is to be as silent as possible until they are allowed to speak. This is because they are usually at a silent retreat. On a Zoom call, the bells and bows are instituted similarly. The student is already sitting and so the bells and bows have even more important meanings to them. In my experience, the bows are made as low as possible so that you are touching or going past the table or desk your screen is resting on. Dokusan is overwhelming for a student just starting their practice. There is plenty to learn but the sangha and the teachers are willing and patient to teach you. It is also acceptable to look about you to make sure you are performing the rituals correctly. Dokusan is a special ritual in which the student can ask their teacher questions about their practice at whatever stage they are at. This is important because zazen is difficult and practitioners have to use their awareness of themselves to overcome their obstacles.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

How Zen Buddhism and Psychotherapy Were Popularized

In the mid-1800s, the United States and Japan were at a standstill. The Tokugawa shoguns engaged in a severe isolation policy.[21] The United States sent Commodore Perry and two armed paddle-wheeled steamships in hope that the Japanese would agree to "friendship, commerce, a supply of coal and provisions, and protection for our shipwrecked people."[22] As a result, in 1860 the first ship arrived in San Francisco. Eight years later, after the defeat of the shoguns, the new emperor hesitantly gave permission for citizens to travel abroad.[23] With the emperor's authorization, the first hundred and forty-nine men traveled to Hawaii to work on the sugar plantations for three years. The environment was horrible, and before Japan sent more men they demanded better conditions for their workers.[24] The more men they sent, the more Buddhism flourished in the town. The town was filled with Christian missionaries and Chinese temples.[25] By the mid-1880s, the first Japanese Buddhist temple was built in Hawaii.[26] After enduring the harsh conditions and not improving, some decided to finally leave for the United States. There was slow growth of immigration to the United States from Japan during the 19th century. The first wave of Japanese immigrants arrived in 1869.[27] By 1870, the United States Census listed seventy Japanese in America.[28] By 1890, there were 2,039 Japanese immigrants.

Despite this low number, Zen Buddhism spread profusely by way of Sokei-an, Soyen Shaku, and was popularized by his student Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki.[29] At that time, there was a focus on Buddhism being a scientific religion, one based on cause and effect. For instance, Shaku wrote a speech called, "The Law of Cause and Effect, as Taught by the Buddha" that claimed that the Buddha was the first discoverer of the law. He believed that Buddhism's

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[21] Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Shambhala Publications, 1992), 88.
[22] Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake,* 89.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid, 90.
[25] Ibid, 92.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 93-94
[28] Ibid, 94.
[29] Ibid, 230.

explanation for our emotions and actions was the law of cause and effect.[30] In other words, there will always be positive and negative aspects to life, but the Buddha did not create this, he discovered it. In the 1890s, D.T. Suzuki focused instead on how Buddhism was organic and had an evolutionary nature.[31] His influence began when he started writing for magazines and then started to write his books based on his teachings. He was influenced by Romanticism and Transcendentalism which molded his view of Zen as being close to nature.[32] For D. T. Suzuki, Zen brought you back to centeredness because it brought you closer to nature. It was in the 1950s that D. T. Suzuki started to focus on psychology.

Zen and psychoanalysis have only been connected since the late 1950s. This connection was introduced at the conference of Autonomous National University in Cuerenavaca, Mexico in 1957.[33] Fifty psychologists and psychoanalysts attended the event. The conference, however, is most well known because the lectures that were later published as *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* were presented by D.T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm, and Richard DeMartino.[34] D. T. Suzuki's lectures talked of Zen through a Freudian lens. He used language such as the "Cosmic Unconscious" to help describe a deeper layer of the Freudian mind.[35] In other words, D. T. Suzuki described the Cosmic Unconscious as what we don't know. This was where our creativity came from.[36] It was something that was never known, and it was always in the background.

Erich Fromm argued alongside D. T. Suzuki's terms but from the psychoanalytic point of view. For example, his view of D. T. Suzuki's Cosmic Unconscious was that it should be called "Cosmic Consciousness" because "reference is made to the function of awareness rather than

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[30] Ibid, 231.
[31] Ibid, 252.
[32] David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 122.
[33] William B. Parsons, "Psychoanalysis Meets Buddhism," 2009.
[34] William B. Parsons, "Psychoanalysis Meets Buddhism."
[35] Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki, and Richard DeMartino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis,* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960) 16-17.
[36] Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki, and Richard DeMartino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis,*17.

place within the personality."[37] Fromm's position was that the Cosmic Consciousness needs to be trained and once trained it enters into the realm of the conscious instead of staying unconscious. In general, the book popularized the idea that Zen could be its own type of therapy. Zazen could bring up the subconscious/unconscious mind and the conscious mind would then discover the distortions. The practitioner would then recognize the distortions and could recover from the trauma.[38]

With the popularity of Zen, science has come knocking on its door. Many studies have shown that meditation reduces stress and anxiety. In 2008, there was a study conducted involving twelve Zen meditators who had been meditating for three years and twelve novice meditators. The functional magnetic resonance images (MRI) showed that the two groups had different reactions to the default network which is how long the brain would take to return to its regular state when a thought would arise. The group of twelve Zen meditators had a better default network and therefore Zen meditation could be helpful for anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[39] Meditation also helps calm the nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system prepares us to fight or flight. Meditation supports our parasympathetic nervous system which slows the heart rate and breathing.[40] When the body becomes stressed a practitioner comes back zazen, to the breath, and focuses on the present moment.

Zen Buddhism and psychotherapy have a relationship as well when it comes to research. In a 2007 study, there were two groups of psychotherapists in training. One group was assigned Zen meditation and the other group was not. The psychotherapists that meditated were found to have significantly higher evaluations from their patients and saw greater symptom

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[37] Ibid, 134.
[38] Ibid, 139.
[39] Guiseppe Pagnoni, Milos Cekic, and Ying Guo, ""Thinking about Not-Thinking": Neural Correlates of Conceptual Processing during Zen Meditation," *PLOS ONE,* (September 2008).
[40] C. Alexander Simpkins and Annellen M. Simpkins, *Zen Meditation in Psychotherapy* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc), 26.

reduction.[41] In 2022, there was a study conducted in which psychotherapists practiced mindfulness and compassion-based interventions (MCBI). Empathy was increased in the psychotherapists and the patients showed improvement, a therapeutic bond, and symptomatology.[42] In other words, psychotherapists who used MCBIs were empathetically seen by patients, they had a close bond with them, and their patient's symptoms improved.

Non-judgmental awareness helps the thoughts subside and initiates healing.[43] The practitioner learns to see their habits and in turn, learns to come back to the present moment no matter how many times they have been distracted with the same non-judgemental awareness to start over again. Eventually, the practitioner learns to be non-reactive which fosters a greater tolerance but also enables there to be more space in the mind.[44] It is within this space where positivity can stay or negativity can creep back in. In zazen, a phenomenon known as makyō can manifest in practitioners. This causes visual, audio, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, or propriocentric hallucinations.[45] Recently, the most well-known case has been the tragic suicide of Megan Vogt in 2017[46]. After a 10-day meditation retreat, she went into psychosis. She had gone to the retreat because she had heard about the benefits and was known to be excited about it. Before she died she had reached out to the center for help but the teacher was under-qualified to deal with Megan's problem.[47] If a teacher with psychotherapeutic training was heading the retreat they could have seen that she was in psychosis and helped her.

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[41] Ludwig Grepmair et al., "Promoting Minfulness in Psychotherapists in Training Influences the Treatment Results of Their Patients," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 76, no. 6 (2007) 332, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48511035.
[42] Elena Garrote-Caprrós et al., "Efficacy of Mindfulness and Compassion-Based Intervention in Psychotherapists and Their Patients: Empathy, Symptomatology, and Mechanisms of Change in a Randomized Controlled Trial," *American Psychological Association* (2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000467.
[43] Katherine V. Masis, "American Zen and Psychotherapy," in *Awakening and Insight*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Inc), 150.
[44] Katherine V. Masis, "American Zen and Psychotherapy," in *Awakening and Insight*, 150.
[45] Ibid, 151.
[46] Christine Vendel, "'She didn't know what was real': Dis 10-day meditation retreat trigger woman's suicide?" *Pennsylvania Real-Time News,* June 29, 2017.
[47] Christine Vendel, "'She didn't know what was real': Dis 10-day meditation retreat trigger woman's suicide?"

Unfortunately, adverse outcomes are not talked about in the community and so people aren't aware to look for signs that something could be seriously wrong. Thankfully for some meditation centers, psychotherapy is now being used to help people have a better meditative experience.

Literature Review

My project is focusing on how Zen Buddhist teachers with psychotherapeutic training differ in their language from teachers who are not trained in psychotherapy. The literature I researched focuses on how Buddhism is used in a clinical setting. This is both helpful and challenging. I have not been able to find examples of what teachers with a psychotherapeutic background would profess in literary form because they focus on bringing the dharma into a clinical setting. However, this makes my research all the more valuable. Through my conversations and the survey, you can see how the relationship between teacher and student is forged with the cloud of psychology surrounding them. Through the literature review, I show that there are books written by professional psychotherapists and Zen practitioners that bring you into their offices and introduce you to their clients. Some give you advice that you can use on their own in their own practice.

Clinicians are incorporating Buddhism into their practice in different ways. They combine the secularity of psychotherapy with religion. It is important to understand these three groups in order to parse out what the leaders of the following centers I studied act out. The first group of psychotherapists named by Ira P. Helderman are the clinicians that translate religion.[48] They bring Buddhist philosophy into their psychotherapy practice to translate it into secular terms. This means that the clinician doesn't involve religion in their practice. Buddhism is transformed into a science. An example of this is Jon Kabat–Zin a psychologist from the University of Massachusetts, who created the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program. Patients

[48] Ira P. Helderman, "Drawing the Boundaries between "Religion" and "Secular" in Psychotherapists' Approaches to Buddhist Traditions in the United States," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84*,* no.4, (December 2016): 948.

practice techniques to reduce anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.[49]. He made a distinction between Buddhist meditation and science. He popularized the buzzword 'mindfulness' as a way to separate the two.[50] The second form of psychotherapy Helderman argues for is a clinician who personalizes religion by practicing Buddhism but does not bring religion into their practice.[51] It is still circular but uses Buddhism theoretical exercises. An example of these psychotherapies are Erich Fromm and Karen Horney.[52] They both wrote about Buddhism and its psychological benefits without advocating for its use. They would not use Buddhism in their practice with patients.

But, what we are focusing on is the last of the three psychotherapists Helderman lists. The clinician that adopts religion personally practices Buddhism and uses their knowledge and philosophy within their clinical practice.[53] Buddhism becomes more important than science. The secular has now become religious. An example of this is Mark Epstein.[54] He teaches meditation techniques and believes it is important to spread the dharma.[55] This means that he teaches the Four Noble Truths in the Eightfold Path.[56] This philosophy focuses on the Middle Way. The practitioner is to focus on having a balanced life. There are not supposed to be any extremes. The mind should be concentrating on having what the Buddha called "right view, right mindfulness, right connection, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right concentration."[57] For Epstein, living in accordance with the Middle Way is the psychotherapy a patient needs. He does not hide what he is trying to do. He promotes Buddhism and psychotherapy simultaneously. Some teachers are more reserved but teach the

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[49] David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.
[50] Ira P. Helderman, "Drawing the Boundaries between "Religion" and "Secular" in Psychotherapists' Approaches to Buddhist Traditions in the United States," 948.
[51] Ibid, 953.
[52] Ibid, 953.
[53] Ibid, 956.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Samyutta Nikāya, *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta—Bhikkhu Bodhi 56.11. Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma*, SuttaCentral. https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi?reference=none&highlight=false.
[57] SuttaCentral, *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta—Bhikkhu Bodhi 56.11. Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma*.

dharma and psychotherapy. There are different levels but the outcome is still the same, people are being helped at a more fundamental level.

In his book, *The Zen of Therapy*, Mark Epstein brings you into the world of the clinician's office and what might be said to a patient. Also, he brings Buddhism into the clinical practice of psychotherapy.

> As I became more open about the spiritual aspects of my thinking, I found that many of my patients wanted this to be included in our work. I came to see that the divisions between the psychological, the emotional, and the spiritual were not as distinct as one might think, and that one way of looking at therapy was a two-person, interpersonal meditation in which whatever arises is worthy of investigation.[58]

Epstein's book is important because it shows how a psychotherapist brings the philosophy of Buddhism into clinical practice. None of the other writings brings you into the room as Epstein does. One of the patients, Jack, struggles with the guilt of his parents' pain due to them being in the Holocaust.[59] Epstein believes that Jack is already healed because Jack himself is his own healer. Epstein tells his readers that Jack is introjecting which means that as a child he took responsibility for his parent's misery and still does during this session.[60] To help Jack, Epstein informs him of the story of the Buddhist Bodhisattva of compassion, Kuan Yin, which means "she who hears our cries" in Chinese. He recounts, she "changed sex and was turned into the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara, whose multiple hands reach out to pluck suffering beings from their fates." He tells Jack that Jack's birth was an act of compassion because he heard his parents' cries and came down to them to help them.[61] Epstein insists that Jack is a healer. Epstein writes that Jack left the session perplexed but thought that it had "throw[n] him off balance."[62] This is one of the reasons kōans are given to students. The point is

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[58] Mark Epstein, *Zen of Therapy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022) 23.
[59] Ibid, 55.
[60] Ibid, 56.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

to give them something to question and will make them in a state of wonder. Epstein argues, “In Buddhist psychology, the concept of ‘skillful means’ refers to the ability to use whatever is available to help others awaken to their true nature.”[63] In other words, using psychology is not a negative way to help people become who they are meant to be by discovering their true nature. Epstein is a great example of how a Buddhist teacher brings Buddhist teaching into his clinical practice. Unfortunately, he did not write a book showing us how you bring psychotherapy into dokusan and practice discussions.

If the self is such a problem is there another way to deal with it? Are there other ways to work out what is going on? Zen Master Dōgen wrote, “To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others.”[64] To understand the Buddha Way a student must practice zazen. When you begin to meditate you focus on seeing the world in a different way. Eventually, they forget that self. Practicing zazen gets you to the point of forgetting the self, like when you forget the self while becoming emersed in a book or a movie. The “you” disappears for a bit during those times, and that is what Dōgen is talking about. For Dōgen, meditation is the best way to study the self because it frees you from the ego keeping you locked down.

In his book, *Zen Beyond Mindfulness,* Jules Shuzen Harris argues that mindfulness is only a small part of the Zen tradition and that it should not be equated with Zen practice as a whole. Zen Buddhism encompasses all aspects of life and requires a deep commitment to self-discovery which can lead to personal transformation. He believes that some people who practice Zen Buddhism are being held back by their past experiences because mindfulness can be used to escape from reality.

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[63] Ibid, 131.
[64] Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen Mystical Realist* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 27.

> I have become convinced that practice, especially deep practice, absolutely requires psychological exploration at the same time. Without that psychological exploration, there's a strong possibility that practice can become "spiritual bypassing," [...] a way of avoiding or repressing problems in the rest of life by pretending [...] to be enlightened enough not to ever be bothered by anything.[65]

This is a problem that cannot be fixed by "just sitting" but by psychological interaction. Harris suggests that there are three ways to stop spiritual bypassing and to face what is holding the reader back. The first is learning Buddhist psychology through Abhidharma, the second is learning the I-System created by Stanley Block, and the third is viewing reality through the lens of Zen Buddhism.[66] Through this system, Harris takes the reader on a journey to uncover what they think of themselves and the world around them. This book is interactive and gives the reader activities to do and he explains the philosophy and theory behind the exercise. This book is important because it shows that psychology is important to the tradition of Zen Buddhism and how spiritual bypassing is a serious obstacle a student needs to know about. "Just sitting" is not enough to get through a trauma that is occurring during a retreat or a simple sit at home.

In *Zen and Psychotherapy*, Joseph Bobrow draws on his experience as a Zen teacher and psychotherapist to show how the two disciplines work together. In the first part of his book, he describes the basic principles and how they can be integrated with psychotherapy. In the second part, he focuses on the practical application of Zen principles in psychotherapy. Bobrow explains,

> Although they contain elements of each other and address similar concerns, Zen and psychotherapy are distinctive paths that challenge and, by virtue of their differences, enrich one another. Zen practice helps us to cut through the subject-object and self-other dichotomies that are such entrenched characteristics of our experience and to open to, realize, and put ourselves

[65] Jules Shuzen Harris, *Zen Beyond Mindfulness* (Boulder: Shambala Publications, 2019), 3.
[66] Jules Shuzen Harris, *Zen Beyond Mindfulness,* 8.

> in accord with our essential nature. Psychotherapy promotes emotional growth, integration, resilience, and psychological freedom.[67]

Although the book combines Zen and psychotherapy and has excerpts of patients it does not combine Buddhist sūtras like Epstein's book. It just lists a part of the patient's session. It does not go the opposite way of having dokusan or a practice discussion and giving the teachings that the students need. The book is mostly examining the relationship between Zen and psychotherapy. He writes, "I think unconscious emotional communication in the relational field is the treasure, the "gold," that psychotherapy brings to the alchemy with Buddhism, to complement and enrich (and challenge) Buddhist practice and teaching."[68]

Overall what I discovered was that there is a missing link between the literature that is available and the research that I conducted. My research shows how a teacher talks to their students and what language they use. It also shows from the student's side what they think about their teacher's reaction to their questions and issues that are brought up during dokusan and practice discussions. My contribution to the field will be showing how language is being used during dokusan and practice discussions. It will show how teachers cannot help themselves and use psychotherapeutic techniques during their sessions with students. Here I have explained the different types of clinicians that incorporate the secularity of Buddhism with their practice of psychotherapy. In my study, we will be looking at the clinicians that personalize religion and clinicians that adopt religion into their practice of psychotherapy. In the literature, I examined how psychotherapists add Zen Buddhism to their work as clinicians. Both Epstein and Bobrow play with intermingling Buddhism and psychotherapy. While Harris brings the therapy to you by writing you a manual on how to combine Zen and psychotherapy yourself. These scholars help their patients in differing ways, but ultimately the final product is the same, someone is getting the help they searched for.

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[67] Joseph Bobrow, *Zen and Psychotherapy* (Boston: Wisdom Publications),16.
[68] Joseph Bobrow, *Zen and Psychotherapy,* 36.

Methodology

What I set out to find was what kind of vocabulary has changed because of the fact that psychotherapists and psychologists have been becoming Buddhist teachers. During dokusan and practice discussions the standard language used is to “just sit” with the issue, but with the psychotherapy teachers, the answers were quite different. Scholarship has been conducted on how psychologists use Buddhism during the client’s appointment, but not during dokusan and practice discussions. To find out how they were different I had conversations with teachers, and students, and conducted a survey. I used mostly qualitative data, but in the survey, I did post some questions for quantitative data. For this sort of research question, I believe that ethnography was the most appropriate way to conduct my research.

In conducting my conversations with my informants, I took copious notes with my laptop and tablet while they were speaking. They had the choice to be anonymous but chose to keep their full names. I asked ten questions per person which equaled an hour of conversation. They were done over Zoom because the informants were from all over the United States, such as Texas, Los Angeles, and Wisconsin. I recruited participants by finding Zen Buddhist groups that had an online presence and emailed them.

With the survey, participants chose what name to go by and if they want to be further contacted by adding their email. There were thirteen questions. Seven were filled in and six were multiple choice. I emailed the survey to Zen Buddhist groups with an online presence. I ran into some issues with the survey. Some of the participants were not shown the full survey because their cookies and cache were full. This is what I was told by Qualtrics support. I emailed the participants that left their email to ask them to retake the survey and some of them did. Some participants did not fill out the survey in full by choice. Overall there were forty-two participants, with around thirty answering all of the questions. See appendices for full charts and statistics.

I chose to have conversations with informants and to conduct a survey because it could give me what the teachers do and say but also what the students hear and experience. Through the conversations, I was able to get a close-up look at the language being used. With the surveys, I was able to get many of the students from all over the world to tell me their experiences with dokusan and practice discussions.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

My ethnography data is focused on three teachers and a survey I have conducted. All of the teachers are ordained with two being psychotherapists. Susanne Kilkus is from Open Door Zen Community (ODZC), Flint Sparks is also a part of ODZC and Appamada but also travels to sanghas across the United States and to the United Kingdom, and Dave Cuomo is from Angel City Zen Center (ACZC). ODZC and ACZC practice Sōtō Zen Buddhism and all three give private practice discussions to their students. The survey had forty-two participants from all over the United States and Europe; the results of which paint the picture of how practitioners relate to their teachers, their experiences with them, and their opinions on the combination of Buddhism and psychotherapy. This ethnographic data first shows how teachers engage with their students and then how students experience their teachers.

Open Door Zen Community has a beautiful garden with a pathway leading to a gazebo amongst the mountains of Madison, Wisconsin. ODZC believes that zazen allows for awakening to one's "true Buddha nature of compassion and insight."[69] In other words, ODZC believes that we all have Buddha nature and a student needs to practice zazen to discover it. ODZC's official start was in 2015, but its original members have been around since the early 2000s. Suzanne Kilkus[70] is one of these founders. When I spoke with her she was wearing a turquoise long-sleeve shirt with patterns. Her hair was pulled back and she has a bright welcoming smile. In the early years of ODZC, she was asked to become the shuso, an assistant teacher and

[69] "About Open Door Zen Community," Open Door Zen Community, accessed December 4, 2022, https://opendoorzencommunity.org/about-open-door-zen-madison/.
[70] Conversation, Suzanne Kilkus, November 16, 2022.

head student, that has responsibilities for the sangha. After expressing that she had more time to give to the center, the head teacher Flint Sparks, who also has a background in psychology, asked her to become an entrusted teacher. This is a year-long process and in the Spring of 2020, she received what she called the function. This allows her to hold what they call private practice discussions. It was important to ODZC that the entrusted teachers spend as much time with Sparks as possible so that they could teach similarly. Kilkus practiced psychotherapy for thirty-five years and has been retired for the last two. Her specialty was marriage and family therapy, as an individual therapist, and as a college counselor. This affects her teaching style when conducting private practice discussions.

Flint Sparks[71] practiced psychotherapy for forty-five years and has been a Buddhist teacher for the last twenty-five. When I spoke with him he had a serious disposition. His head was shaved and he had round thin-rimmed glasses with a stern expression, but once he started talking you could see that he radiated compassion. Sparks worked with people with advanced cancers and wanted to learn how to grapple with deep psychological "questions of the soul."[72] He wanted to learn how to respond better and looked toward Buddhism and connected with the question, "How do we deal with suffering?"[73] He began to go to retreats and found that people were struggling when psychological issues were coming up, but he discovered that when he put the spiritual practice with the psychological work, people were able to be successful at overcoming their issues. He says his job ultimately is to "remove barriers to love" so that others can "reflect long enough to be heard," and "to feel the other person's presence."[74]

Angel City Zen Center is in the heart of Los Angeles, California. Their center is a bright blue house with a garden, has a large Buddha waiting to greet you on the front porch, and

[71] Conversation, Flint Sparks, December 13, 2022.
[72] "Flint Sparks," accessed March 3, 2023, https://www.flintsparks.org/teachings.
[73] "Flint Sparks," accessed March 3, 2023, https://www.flintsparks.org/teachings.

[74] "Flint Sparks," accessed March 3, 2023, https://www.flintsparks.org/teachings.

promotes a casual atmosphere open to anyone.[75] When speaking with Dave Cuomo,[76] he wore a black beanie over his shaved head bearing a large, energetic smile as he sat eagerly waiting for my questions. Cuomo started practicing around 2007, he says, for many different reasons; a girlfriend, family, writer's block, mental health, and quitting smoking. So, he checked out a group, started meditating, and ended up practicing at Nashville Zen Center for seven years. Because he was there so consistently, he was put in leadership positions. The tasks included giving talks his first year or two, ringing bells, leading ceremonies, and giving instructions at retreats. They wanted to ordain him, but he decided that he wanted to be ordained by Brad Warner and left for Los Angeles. He wanted to be a military chaplain and so he started grad school. However, ACZC took over his life making him drop his military ambitions as the center became his full-time concern. He officially started performing practice discussions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sparks believed that Buddhism and psychology have been intertwined in the past few years because of the use of mindfulness in a secular manner in research. He thought that mindfulness has brought Buddhism towards psychotherapy and that Buddhism is a psychological religion. With the research of mindfulness, brain research, and trauma, there is "a matrix of things that have brought all this stuff together." The interest in suffering has also had its effect on the combination. He claimed that cultural shifts have caused people to be interested in how to reduce people's suffering in a self-responsible way which is what Buddhism is all about. For Sparks, both Buddhism and psychotherapy allow you to take responsibility for your life in a behavioral, ethical, and deeper existential manner. He commented, "Buddhism begins to touch some of those things in a real practical way." In other words, Buddhism helps people tap into a part of themselves that they usually cannot reach. He added, "No matter which seat I'm in that's the function, it helps soften any kind of barriers that we have to what it means to be fully awake

[75] "Soto Zen meditation in Echo Park, Los Angeles." Angel City Zen Center. 2023. https://www.aczc.org/about-us.
[76] Conversation, Dave Cuomo, March 6, 2023.

and aware and alive. So that sort of removing or softening barriers to love is I think the key. And a psychotherapist and a teacher may have different approaches or tools but there is a shared thing there." Sparks' perspective is that people are able to focus on humanity which can affect their empathy towards others.

When Sparks was practicing psychotherapy, which he has now retired from, he had a specific perspective and responsibilities. If he took someone on as a client there would be an orientation. He would work through whatever "archaic issues and behavioral challenges" they were experiencing and would help them manage their symptoms and relationships. In dokusan, he does not have that kind of perspective. He reported they bring exactly the same issues but, "What's the embodied immediacy with what we can touch right in this moment which helps them realize themselves as a Buddha who's carrying these aspects of suffering, but their freedom isn't separate from the suffering that they're experiencing." Spark's stance is that in the moment it is important for the person to realize what they are feeling in the moment and that their freedom and suffering are not unrelated. He argued what matters is how he carries himself into the session. In dokusan, Sparks focuses on what is in the present moment which helps them return to that state of mind. Sparks is also focusing on the First Noble Truth that all life is suffering and this is something that is not focused on in psychotherapy. It helps to examine the contents of awareness and what space the awareness is arising and passing away from.

In Kilkus' private practice discussions, she bridges the gap between Zen Buddhism and psychotherapy. People come to her emphasizing that they are struggling with a relationship and she will agree to the meeting, but it will focus on how they can bring their practice to the issue. Interestingly she brings attention to her psychology background when in the private practice discussion. Kilkus described how she learned from Sparks to say, "If we look at it from a psychological lens, this is what's coming up right now, we aren't going to do therapy." Spark's outlook is that the student needs to bring awareness to what they are experiencing but to do the work themselves. Kilkus elaborated that if she was doing therapy she would include, "what's

going on, what's the history of it, what's the system involved here, the family system, what needs attending to, cognitive, emotional." She adds, "They don't do that here, but we can name it, it's really important to name it." Kilkus' stance is that they are not performing psychotherapy in the private practice discussions, but they are focusing on naming the issues that come up for the practitioner. Kilkus described the naming process using her hands. Her hand popped up and she looked at it as if it were a puppet. She continued, "When a fear pops up, you wait and look at it, turn toward it, use your hands." Kilkus has a Ph.D. in somatic psychology so this comes extremely naturally to her. She reports that in the private practice discussion, she will ask them to turn toward it and ask what they see. Although she is using psychotherapeutic language she is not practicing psychotherapy. She is using the dharma to help her students with their issues but using this language instead of telling them to "just sit."

When I spoke to Sparks about naming the problem and how she learned it from him he answered that it was similar to Internal Family Systems Therapy. He said, for example, if someone was self-critical he would help them realize that it is actually just a part of them. In psychotherapy, this is a construction of their personality, but in Buddhism, this is a agent called samskara. Sparks emphasized that this is not their wholeness, but if they identify with that part of themselves then they will see the world through that lens. But as a Bodhisattva, someone who wants to save all beings, there is a way to step back and end this cycle and turn towards one's true nature. He suggested they can turn inside and outside themselves and see that there is suffering and look with compassion. They can realize that that part of them carries suffering. Sparks would ask them as a teacher to look into a space of pure awareness for a moment and look at the world through the part that is not self-critical. He continued, "If someone can do that then they are in a different world. That they are either that or not what they thought they were." Spark's argument is that the person needs to identify with the part of themselves that wants to help people and stop the cycle of suffering. When they stop their own cycle it helps someone else stop theirs.

Cuomo expressed that Buddhism and psychology have become intertwined because people are being drawn to psychology and then these people are being drawn to Buddhism. He states, “A) because Buddhism deals with a lot of science of the mind and B) because there seems to be an opportunity to do some work there.” He believed that whenever Buddhism goes to a new country or a new culture it graphs itself onto whatever is currently the dominant paradigm for understanding. Cuomo insisted, “The culture at large does not trust the Christian stories of how, who, and what we are in the same way we trust psychology and physics.” He added, “The real religion is science, and psychology is science, so it makes sense that we dropped into that.”

Practice Discussions and Trauma

Cuomo believed that all of the people in his practice discussion dealt with trauma. He argued, “We are dealing with suffering inherent to the karma from the beginningless time that's what we're processing.” Whether or not somebody's had trauma, he is very conscious of the fact that he is not doing individualized therapy. Cuomo is not licensed for counseling, so he is working only from the Buddhist tradition. According to the tradition he stated, “We share, um, from the beginning this time an ancient karma that we may not be doing it dealing within different things in this lifetime.” He hesitated to say that he was helping any one person in this lifetime’s karma.

During the practice discussions, Cuomo tries to keep focused on the present moment. He attempts to gauge where someone is and what they were capable of. Cuomo does not want to push someone too far but also wants to explore what is happening. He added it's like a testing ground. He will ask people directly how far they are willing to go. For example, He might ask, “Hey I see this is coming up how far into that do you are you feel comfortable going?” or “Can you explore that?” Cuomo emphasized that many times we find that people do not have the best awareness of the present-moment experience. Due to this lack of awareness, you might be witnessing something that the students do not know how to articulate. In this case, he

will usually want to name it at the moment and see if there is recognition there, or see if he can get them to name it, name the problem. He suggested, “Sometimes it makes more sense to explore it cognitively like the roots of what's coming up like, ‘Oh this stems from that,’ and ‘This is how I process things.’” In other words, it's more powerful to just sit with people and watch them feel what is coming up. Cuomo continued that it can be beneficial and therapeutic because it says, “It's OK it's safe and it's OK to feel triggered” which he thinks, "A lot of us don't get an opportunity to feel like that. He feels that this is “un-Zen,” but being able to “clearly concisely, expressed things, name them, and describe them in clear senses can be powerful. Then you have a shorthand, which can let you let things go. If you can see it, name it, and let it go.”

I asked Cuomo about Kilkus’ comment on turning towards the problem and looking at it. He started by saying that psychotherapy and practice sessions are, and should be, different. He sees a trend in America that mixes the two. He goes on to say that many psychiatrists are becoming Zen priests and are confusing the two disciplines. Not only are Zen priests well trained, but most Zen priests are not trained for psychotherapy; thus the two should be separate disciplines. According to Cuomo, they have different end goals. He asserted, “When they say looking at the problem, I assume that I had in my training which most priests don't have to have a graduate degree as I do and is lucky I have it.” He added he has had mild counseling training, and knows “some family systems therapy, and some Freud.” Cuomo understands that the therapists would have an abundance of systems, so “They're gonna look at somebody's problem and have a framework and structure that is scientific, proven, and work models that are reliable that they can draw.” He claimed that in Zen we don't have that, making the end goal different from psychotherapy. That being said, Cuomo did agree that the psychotherapeutic language is helpful. He asked himself,

> What do I need right now if somebody doesn't clearly feel comfortable sitting in front of you feeling uncomfortable with their feelings, that's the time to sit with it because right now that's

> learning a new skill. It's a safe place to get some freedom on being president which is what we're trying to do here.

Cuomo sometimes likes to help people learn how to express things by looking at a problem directly or “kind of playing with it”, which still keeps it in the present moment. He observed that people will go into their narratives and talk about their past and their families. This is where he feels he is on shaky ground because he doesn't have structures and models, and frameworks for them. At this moment he frames his teachings from the dharma, which is one of the skills that he is trained with. Cuomo emphasized that when they give him a problem, he will restate it back in terms of a “fourth truth, the 12 full chain things that Buddha or Zen teachers have said.” Cuomo asserts the job is to promote and support the practice of Zen and how that can help, and the teachings, precepts, and things of that nature are his frameworks. He continued that psychotherapy is also a wonderful job but it's not his job.

For some practitioners, the traditional way can not work. Kilkus stated that she was never helped by turning away from whatever problems arose. She continued, “There is such a thing as navel-gazing or spiritual bypassing in our practice, just sit through it, just go ahead and sit. I was never helped by that because stuff comes up and if I didn’t turn toward it I’d turn away from it.” Kilkus’ idea was that sometimes “just sitting” does not work and people need to look directly at the issue in order to deal with it or else they will turn away from it and not process it. This means that they will not grow in their practice and will stagnate. Writing in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, Jack Engler explains, “The attempt to bypass the developmental task of identity formation and object constancy through a misguided spiritual attempt to “annihilate the ego” has fateful and pathological consequences.”[77] Engler’s position is that practitioners are drawn to bypassing, but they are hurting themselves in the long run.

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[77] Jack Engler, “Therapeutic aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation: Developmental Stages in the Representation of Self,” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1984), 52.

For example, Sparks was in a monastery with his friend, and their teacher was known for being harsh. This harshness triggered “old father trauma” in his friend. Sparks explained that if you cannot move or act in some physical way then the trauma goes into the body. His friend carried all this trauma with him throughout the retreat because he was told to sit with it and to not speak about it. Sparks called this a re-traumatization. You are not able to express your trauma in a healthy way and you are told over and over again to sit down with it, do not move, and do not speak about it. He agreed that there are times when you can sit with a trauma longer and that there is a “wholesome” aspect to that when,

> Opening your heart and relaxing your body and your mind to meet something, and it’s sort of delicate intimacy, something that you’ve tried to turn away from, or it’s hard for you to stay with, but it can be a way of finally going deeper and realizing what that is.

Spark’s argument is that when a practitioner attempts to go deeper into their practice through relaxation of the body and mind they can find the truth to finding the solution rather than sitting through the trauma and making it worse.

Sparks believed that there are times in which “just sitting” is appropriate. A teacher can tell you to sit with a problem longer but one must “open your heart and relax your mind to meet something, and it’s sort of delicate intimacy, something you’ve turned away from, or it’s hard for you to stay with, but it can be a way of finally going deeper and realizing what it is.” This is a gentle way to think about being with yourself. The activity is about going into meditation with the intention of figuring out the issue and opening up to it and surrendering to it. Sparks gave the example of when there was a person who went on a long retreat without a lot of experience. By the fourth day, they came to the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki and told him that they could not continue on and that the retreat was too much for them. Sparks said that Suzuki did not talk him out of staying or leaving, but advised, “You know, we try and we try, and we fall, and then we go deeper.” Suzuki’s position is that you have to challenge yourself.

In reaction to Spark's statement, I asked Cuomo, "Some teachers say that just sitting with the trauma can lead to re-traumatization because if you can't act or move with the trauma, it goes into the body is just sitting enough or is there something else that needs to be practiced?" He responded that he always tells people to make their own decisions and uses the analogy of yoga. Cuomo explained, "You only know if your knee can move in a certain direction it's up to you to know what that pain is, is it productive pain, or are you strengthening stretching out some ligaments you need to be stretched out, or are you doing actual damage to the tendons?" He insisted it is the same with your psyche. Cuomo emphasized, "If you have serious PTSD and sitting against the wall you're gonna really go into flashback mode and hurt somebody and yourself if you're re-traumatizing yourself that's on you to know the difference I will check that for people, but I've never seen it be an issue." He sees that more often times people in clear danger for whom sitting is too uncomfortable, aren't sitting enough and if sitting is too hard, they just need to find a different practice they can learn matter or breath practice. These can be good training wheels. But he states that is not what he offers and that is not what he is trained in. Ultimately, he believed that to figure yourself out from your trauma or conditioning you need to be able to sit with it and that's how you were able to make your peace and liberate yourself. He acknowledged, "In Buddhist terms, you could say that might not happen in this lifetime but that's OK. This might not be the go around where you're ready for them and that's cool."

Makyō

During long meditation retreats or long meditation sessions, one can experience makyō. I asked Sparks why he thought this happened. He replied, "This is what minds do. If you do not give them something to focus on they make stuff up because their minds want something to focus on." He compared it to dreaming, emphasizing that it is just what human minds do. He added, "Different people have different experiences due to what is in their subconscious. It is natural for the mind to fill a blank space. The mind can do positive things when it attaches. It usually attaches to your heart, mind, and body during a retreat because you are the one that is

there.” He said that sometimes during long sitting periods, he loses his vision and he essentially goes blind. However, when the bell rings or someone nudges him his vision returns. He continued there are times when it gets “kinda dreamy and weird things happen and then there’s all the unexpressed longings and needs and all that comes up.” He says that our mind is like a mirror and you see stuff about yourself. He emphasized it is normal because we are mammals to always be asking three big questions seven times a second. These questions are, “Are you there? Do you hear me? Do you choose me?” The first question is the foundation of attachment. The second is attunement. The third is essentially do you love me? He says that we are not good at self-regulation and require the help of others to help us through those questions. If we do not have help with these foundational questions, we struggle, and some turn to drugs or alcohol to regulate their feelings. He believed that addictions are attachment disorders. Because we are mammals and ask these questions, our minds create things that are not there when we sit.

Interestingly, Cuomo does not have people complain about makyō. He believed it is a natural byproduct of sitting. He explained,

> Things are gonna get weird and it's gonna get uncomfortable. It's a signpost that’s to be expected in the course of making peace with yourself. Basic Buddhist principles are that most of what you know as reality is a coping mechanism. The fact that you can't rely on your perception they're always delusional you have to have a constructed reality that's based on a restorative paradigm lens based on probably some pretty corrupted and traumatized karma. There's gonna be some overstuff that's gonna come out especially, as you combine your demons with the fact that your very sensory awareness is now up for grabs.

Cuomo insisted it is one expected thing that will most likely happen if you're gonna drop off body and mind. “Keep sitting,” He argued, “It's always been our answer so around here it's not been an issue because when people have that experience, they might record it, we might talk about it, but it's never been seen as a problem to solve.” It is seen as an expected byproduct of

sitting long enough for it to start getting deep. He thought the only problem people might have was if their expectation was that meditation was good for you and would make you feel good and should never be a problem. Cuomo stated,

> If you're coming out of it with the awareness that this is a practice that was seriously designed to drop off body and mind experience the ultimate truth of emptiness, and to meet God in those terms, then yeah, I mean like it's a small thing to see a little demon on the wall he says with a laugh.

Makyō is a rare state but it is important to talk about. Seeing something as drastic as a demon walking on a wall in front of you while you meditate is quite disturbing. Both teachers pushed back when I brought up this topic. Sparks wanted to know my definition of makyō implying I did not know what it was, and Cuomo commented that it did not happen often. I personally know people who have had this experience and I have talked about Megan Vogt. I believe that knowing you can have hallucinations should be talked about within the community.

As we have seen teachers use language that is beyond “just sitting.” First, the teachers who are psychotherapists tell their students to “look at the problem”, “turn towards it”, “see it”, and to “work from there”. Second, all three teachers tell their students to name the problem. This is significant because this shows that even the traditional Sōtō Zen teacher is using non-traditional language. Third, all three bring the teachings of the dharma to relate it back to the student’s current issue. They are not bringing therapies to dokusan or practice discussions. Even if they use Internal Family Systems Therapy, they flip it so that they are talking through the teaching of the Buddha and not through a psychologist. This is what the teachers see themselves doing, now let’s see what the students experience. In this next section we will explore the survey data I collected that features the student’s voices. The data demonstrates what they work on in their practice, what they think of Buddhism and psychology, and what advice they get from their teachers. It also provides insight into what they think about their teachers and how they teach.

Survey Data

Forty-two people participated in the survey. They were from various Zen Buddhist groups I could find that had an internet presence. Most of the participants were sixty-five years and older with 34%, while both age ranges were thirty-five to forty-four and fifty-five to sixty-four had 22% of the group (appendix 1). 30% of participants practiced zazen for one to five years, and 26% practiced for eleven to fifteen years with a close 20% of participants practicing for twenty-plus years (appendix 2). When asked what their meditation experience was like 33% said somewhat easy and another 33% had a neutral experience (appendix 3). During retreats, 30% said it was somewhat difficult while 27% said it was somewhat easy. The participants' experience after a retreat was easy and somewhat easy with 27% of the vote each. Returning from a retreat was nearly split with 27% saying it was easy and 23% saying it was somewhat difficult. A resounding 71% of participants found that their needs were understood by their teachers, while 24% answered that they did not know, and 5% felt they were not understood (appendix 4). The same results were found when asked if the teachings they received from their instructor furthered their practice positively (appendix 5).

Participants were asked what their experience was with their teacher and what they tell them when issues arise. During dokusan participants had positive and helpful experiences with their teacher. Onsen, a student, commented, "They listen. If a problem that can be helped w/practice, they suggest an approach that may help. They remind me to be gentle with myself." Steve, reflected that his teacher "doesnt fill in the blanks for me, but gives me general direction, but its on me to figure it out for me." Leon declared that he continues practicing and investigating the issue with his teacher. These experiences with their teachers are positive and their teachers are guiding them through their issues. JM wrote that his teacher tells him, "Don't worry about it, just keep meditating." They report that the teacher will give them a text to look at for support. This language represents the "just sit" attitude of the traditional Sōtō Zen teacher. Bonnie commented that her teacher tells her to, "Turn towards rather than away from" the issue.

This is clearly language that is different than the “just sit” attitude. Her teacher is telling her to observe the problem. Dave observed, “When I complain about difficulties in practice he always listens and responds empathetically but never seems to view them as problems to be solved. Leaves me with the feeling that getting comfortable with these difficulties is part of the practice of letting go.” This seems like the “just sit” language because the teacher does not really say anything. Leah, describing herself as a “student, I guess” notes that she gains useful advice from her teacher during private practice discussions. Randall reported his teacher telling him to be “aware of his thoughts during intense anger.” The language being used here to deliberately bring them back to the present moment. During private practice discussions, Bonnie reflected that her teacher tells her to “meet what fully arises.” This language encourages bravery and also encourages mindfulness. Susanne declared that she experiences “kindness, encourage curiosity, support, offering [a] new lens to [the] issue” with her teacher. During group discussions, participants have a more emotional and personal experience. Leon wrote that he gets emotional support from his sangha. Randall reported, “We covered negative emotions and we shouldn’t grasp them.” Sue noted she experienced “straightforward, thoughtful, caring, high expectation” from her group discussions. Dave commented that his teacher, “Answers questions usually with stories from personal experience. Oddly open about opinions of how Zen is going wrong in the West and problems with Sōtō Zen institution, but without coming across as judgemental somehow.” This also seems like “just sit” language because that teacher is not telling the student to do anything.

Participants were asked about how their teachers furthered their practice positively. Onsen wrote, “They help me see the “big picture”, and how my practice can practically benefit myself and others.” Goose, a renunciate, commented, “My teachers tend to drop into the feeling tone of what’s current for me and apply strategies to bring I’m about the most trustworthy healing.” Goose’s teachers seem very close to them and are able to further their practice on a more personal level than other students’ experience. A student simply said that their teacher

encourages them to pay attention. This is probably this student's biggest hurdle. JM's teacher emphasizes epistemology. While Leslie noted her teacher is "incapable of flexibility." That is a very negative note of a traditional Sōtō Zen teacher. Randall reflected his teacher, "Helps clarify and confirm my own findings and offers a clear interpretation of them." Sue wrote, "They relate it to my life." Bonnie commented, "I am heard and seen by my teacher and they often reflect back what they see and offer support for my conditioned response/suffering. They encourage me to continue practicing." Suzanne reflected, "It is clear he is interested in offering teaching that supports the practice and everyday life. [...] He is available emotionally and relationally. He embodies authenticity and love." Dave noted, "Really it's up to me what I do with his advice and guidance. [...] The fact that he openly acknowledges and encourages this independence as the truth of the relationship is a large part of why I trust him." These students have had very positive experiences with their teachers and with the advice they have been given.

Participants were questioned if they thought Buddhism and psychology overlapped. 24% of participants said that they do not overlap. Onsen wrote, "I see both are mind techniques to ease people's suffering, and some modern psychology (CBT) seems to draw on Buddhist thought. However, I think they are often conflated when that shouldn't be." JM believes people join Buddhism and psychology together because "psychological concepts can be helpful very, very, very early on the path." I believe what they are saying is that Buddhism can be so difficult that using psychology can alleviate the struggles of philosophy. Dave believes they do not overlap as well. He stated,

> The main difference I see is that clinical psychology seems to have as its goal the actualization of the person as happier and feeling more fulfilled being. The Buddhist track had an ultimate aspiration of the letting go of the attachment to self that has a need to feel happier and fulfilled as the only true way to relieve suffering.

Most of the participants believed that Buddhism and psychology did overlap. Robert wrote, "I think psychology figured out what Buddhism was working on already." Goose, a renunciate,

noted that his teacher create a bridge between the two. Steve reflected that Buddhism and psychology “reduce suffering, and contemplation of the causes of effects are front and center in both.” Buddhism and psychology both work in the same field and so work well together. Leon declared, “Buddhism is largely concerned with inverstigating and changing mental processes.” Randall reported, “Yes. One used the scientific method and the other uses a spiritual method.” Suzanne wrote, “Buddhis[m] is the study of reality for me. The best psychology is about facing reality with a open heart and mind… it’s our attitude that makes the difference.” John emphasized,

> Massively! I completely agree with Flint’s [Sparks] view that they are like the twin strand of DNA. as he says, (in my words), therapy without Buddhism is too small - it is just about brushing up the ego, while Buddhism without therapy can lead to all sorts of unacknowledged and unmet feelings and consequent acting out. I practice Internal Family Systems and see it as ‘the therapeutic wing of Buddhism, given the a) IFS Self is the same as Buddhist no-self, and b) I see a core feature of my IFS practice as non-doing and non-knowing and c) quite often a client and I stray into the area of ‘Practice’ rather than ‘therapy’ - that simply happens.

I believe that John adopts religion and uses IFS as well as the dharma to understand and work on his issues. Respondents have good points on both sides.

Participants were asked if they would like to add or share anything pertaining to how their teacher navigates their issues or how their advice helps them through trauma. Onsen found, “Technology of practice itself, and accepting it as an embodied practice has helped me through trauma more than any psychological counseling ever did. My teachers encourage me to value myself as myself, but help me learn (often by example) skillful speech and action.” Buddhist practice was really powerful for Onsen. It helped them in a way psychotherapy never could. Learning from examples is an influential way to learn. Goose reported, “I find my teachers/spiritual friends are good at guiding me through difficult/traumatic experiences.” Steve stated, “My teacher is very accessible and more than anything, listens.” This is such a crucial

value that teachers should have. They should be guiding, accessible, and listening to their students. JM reflected,

> As an neurodivergent person who struggles with severe cPTSD, I'd honestly say that finding a teacher that leans more on traditional understandings of the dark things that comeup in practice [...] has been significantly more helpful for me than, and within a short amount of time, than decades of psychotherapy, psychiatry, psychology-informed Buddhism, etc. was. By enormous leaps and bounds.

Jm's statement is powerful. Having a teacher that is understanding of the darker side of life is important because that makes one feel understood. Barbara wrote, "I've been so impressed how Flint [Sparks] normalizes the issues and anxieties we all have without minimizing the grief that they cause each of us in our own special situation." Bonnie celebrated, "He's a skilled psychotherapist as well as a Buddhist teacher. He is fully present and meets me where I am." Suzanne praised, "Flint [Sparks] is trained as a psychologist as I am. Meeting each other in the space is deeply supportive. He encourages healing as a spiritual teacher without getting entangles in the psychotherapeutic process." Leslie thought that her fellow students were more helpful than her teachers were. Unfortunately, she is not getting the proper help from her teacher. Dave remarked,

> I don't fully trust it! My teacher is a very compassionate person who seems incapable of feelings of anger or defensiveness around perpetrators and systems of abuse. I admire this greatly. But I'm not sure that his attitude isn't sometimes an enabler of abuse by not holding such people and systems account. On a personal level, I drew inspiration from his example. On a practical level, I think I might be more inclined to listen to and trust my own anger and resentments as a signal guiding me on how to create structures and relationships that cause less harm. These are open questions I am still exploring though and feel I have a lot to learn in the area.

There are many opinions on how a teacher should help a student through an issue, whether it be hands-off or hands-on. It seems that teachers are helping their students through whatever is coming up for them. Fellow students were also nurturing in the process of overcoming trauma.

Conclusion

Language is how we communicate with one another and it influences the way we act and the emotions we feel. I have shown the ways in which three Zen teachers use language to instruct their students during dokusan and practice discussions. Also, you have read about the reactions of students and what advice they have been given. Kilkus, Sparks, and Cuomo care for their students and also are students themselves. This means that this data is important for anyone who is interested in choosing a teacher with a background in psychotherapy or one without. Even though Kilkus and Sparks are not trying to inject psychotherapy into their practice, I will show that they do have elements of adopting religion. Cuomo as well surprisingly has a part in intertwining similar language.

First, Kilkus and Sparks used language such as “look at it,” “turn towards it,” “use your hands,” and “work from there.” These two teachers who are also psychotherapists are using language that is tactile and physical. It makes you want to see the problem or trauma that is arising. This language goes far beyond “just sitting.” A student corroborated these statements saying that Sparks told them to “turn towards it.” This language is specific for the psychotherapist teachers and not for Cuomo.

Secondly, Kilkus, Sparks, and Cuomo all used the untraditional language of “name it.” Kilkus and Cuomo both used “see it,” and Cuomo added, “Let it go.” This language is also physical. You name the problem creating it into something and then see yourself letting it go. The language sounds therapeutic. The “name it,” “see it,” and “let it go” language is not what you would find Zen Master Dōgen saying to his students. Traditional Zen says to sit and stare at the wall and deal with what is going on in your life. Even Cuomo says at one point that you should “just sit” with the problem you are facing. But, I think the therapeutic language is useful for people with trauma and a part of how Buddhism is evolving.

Thirdly, Kilkus, Sparks, and Cuomo relate the teachings of the dharma to their student’s problems. For example, Sparks focused on the first Noble Truth in sessions that all life is

suffering which is not focused on psychotherapy. This focuses the student's issue on their practice. Also, Sparks flipped what could be IFS Therapy into Buddhist practice which would be the equivalent of samskara. What could have been focused on therapy is now being focused on being a Bodhisattva. Cuomo felt like he was on shaky ground when his student would talk about their past or family problems, but he frames it with the teachings from the dharma. They do not use any psychotherapies during dokusan or practice discussions. If they do come across an issue that is similar to a technique to a psychological therapy, they relate it back to the dharma in order to escape using psychotherapy personalizing it.

A way Kilkus personalized religion was when she was a psychotherapist. During Kilkus' career, she never taught zazen. She did however suggest meditation, which she believed would improve their mental health. She said that it was not from a spiritual practice though she knew it would become a spiritual practice for them. She advised, "Good psychology will lead to good spirituality and vice versa." Kilkus' viewpoint is that having a strong foundation in psychology grows your spirituality and that having a good sense of spirituality gives you better mental health. She taught people how to calm their bodies, and how to calm their minds. She instructed her patients how to sit with something for five minutes with something they have not been able to sit with to discover "what this is all about." In other words, Kilkus was teaching her patients meditation techniques. She was bringing her knowledge of meditation to the clinic, but not teaching them zazen. She was keeping the techniques secular. Kilkus was personalizing religion in this case because she was practicing Buddhism but did not advocate for its use.[78] She did suggest meditation but it is not implying the philosophy of Buddhism as it would if she advised practicing zazen.

Fourth, the Buddhist teachers with a psychotherapeutic background had a more favorable rapport than the Sōtō Zen group that did not have a background in psychology.

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[78] Ira P. Helderman, "Drawing the Boundaries between "Religion" and "Secular" in Psychotherapists' Approaches to Buddhist Traditions in the United States," 953.

Students that marked that they studied under Flint Sparks had this to say about their teacher. Bonnie wrote, “I am heard and seen by my teacher and they often reflect back what they see and offer support for my conditioned response/suffering.” Suzanne stated, “He is available emotionally and relationally. He embodies authenticity and love.” On the other hand, students that marked that they studied under a traditional Sōtō Zen Buddhist teacher Brad Warner, who does not have a psychotherapeutic background, had this to say about their teacher. Leslie noted, “They are incapable of offering flexibility.” Dave answered, “...I’m not sure that his attitude isn’t sometimes an enabler of abuse by not holding such people and systems to account.” I am surprised by these statements. It seems stereotypical. The psychotherapist is the nice person who listens and has the answers to your problems, while there is the traditional Sōtō Zen monk who stands there and hits you with a stick for not sitting still long enough. There needs to be more research to show if satisfaction with a teacher is becoming dependent on a background in psychology. Whether that be in the basics or a degree. That would be an interesting study and something that Buddhism will need to grapple with eventually with more and more teachers adopting religion.

With the popularity of Buddhism and psychology growing, centers that combine the two will become more in demand. Here are two examples of two Buddhist centers Spirit Rock and Dharma Punx NYC. Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center incorporates Buddhist Psychology Training for its teachers.[79] Spirit Rock was founded in 1996 by a group of teachers, notably Jack Kornfield, who wanted a meditation center that focused on the community. From the beginning, Spirit Rock was heavily influenced by Western psychology.[80] Teachers at Spirit Rock emphasize addressing psychological blocks or emotional issues because even when you have a feeling of awakening, you are always brought back to the self.[81] The self is where the healing needs to

[79] “Buddhist Psychology Training Program with Matthew Brensilver, PhD — January - May, 2021 - Spirit Rock - An Insight Meditation Center,” 2021, https://www.spiritrock.org/buddhist-psychology-training.
[80] Ann Gleig, *American Dharma Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Austin: Yale University Press, 2019), 114.
[81] Ann Gleig, *American Dharma Buddhism Beyond Modernity*, 116.

happen so the feeling of enlightenment is not smothered immediately by your psychological troubles. A student should strive for balance. Working with a teacher on both their practice and psychological challenges helps keep your spiritual practice in balance with your personal life.

Another group that integrates psychology and meditative practices is Dharma Punx NYC + Brooklyn. Dharma Punx NYC is run by Josh Korda and Kathy Cherry.[82] The group was created by Noah Levine who is now the founder of the Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society in California.[83] Korda's largest influence was the Insight meditation teacher and psychotherapist Tara Brach. Her focus is on self-acceptance and emotional maturity. He has adopted her approach along with psychoanalytic theories, such as attachment theory. Korda's dharma talks focus on encouraging emotional health.[84] He believes that meditation can be dangerous if someone has experienced trauma. He thinks that silent retreats are not recommended for someone with psychological trauma because they could cause psychological damage.[85] Korda argues that teachers should be able to tell the difference between someone "contemplating impermanence versus someone who is experiencing a dissociative episode or experiencing depersonalization."[86]

Kilkus, Sparks, and Cuomo frame their teachings within the dharma, and they bring their student's problems back to the dharma. They might use psychotherapeutic language, but they do not use psychotherapeutic therapies during dokusan or practice discussions. There needs to be more research done on the language being used during dokusan and practice discussions to show the difference between it and therapy. The problem is that dokusan and practice discussions are private. We will have to wait until someone like Mark Epstein writes a book that is the opposite of what he wrote for *Zen of Therapy* and have the sessions be from dokusan. I

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[82] "Dharma Punx NYC", https://www.dharmapunxnyc.com/#mentoring-section.
[83] "About Noah – NOAH LEVINE" 2019, https://noahlevine.com/about-noah/.
[84] Ann Gleig, *American Dharma Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Austin: Yale University Press, 2019), 120-21.
[85] Ann Gleig, *American Dharma Buddhism Beyond Modernity,* 123.
[86] Ibid.

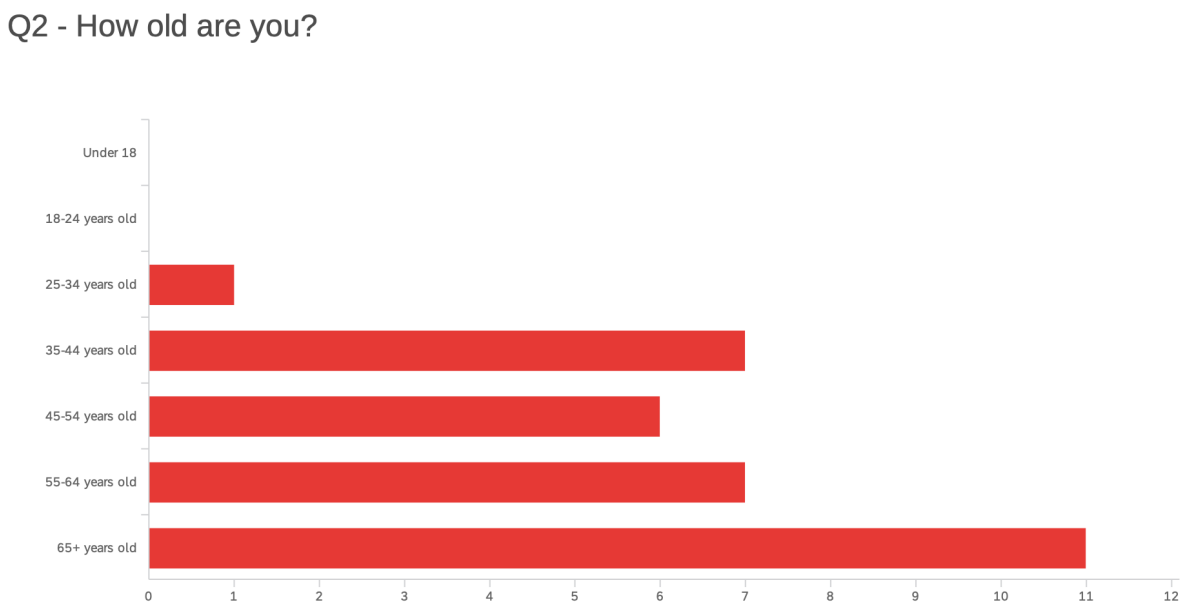
did find a book called *Dokusan with Dōgen,*[87] but it had nothing to do with dokusan. She said, "The title [...] may be misleading" and it was. Even though she described it as being dharma talks that was also not correct. The book had quotes from Dōgen and the Buddha and other Zen Masters but, otherwise, it was just her opinions on topics. You must use the right terminology when writing a book hence why I constantly use dokusan and practice discussion in my paper.

This study had a small sample size. Three conversations and forty-two participants were just enough to get an outline of what is going on. With time I could make more contacts which could make the survey much larger. If I opened up the survey to more than just Zen centers that would also allow for more opinions of teachers with a psychotherapeutic background. I look forward to more research on Zen centers. I am interested in how other teachers act toward their students, what language they use, and how their students react to their teachings. I look forward to the future to expanding this research.

In conclusion, there is no definite way to tell if the language being used today during dokusan and practice discussions is different than the language used during the thirteenth century because of how private these sessions are, but from the phrase "just sitting" the language is clearly different. Turning toward the future the language will change more, and time will tell what phrases teachers will use to help their students with struggles with the practice, or traumas. With the popularity of psychotherapy and Buddhism growing there can only be growth in the many phrases that will be used in these sessions. What will be the keyword phrases? Will they be similar across the board? Only time and research will tell.

[87] Barbara Verkuilen, *Dokusan with Dogen* (Madison: Firethroat Press, 2011).

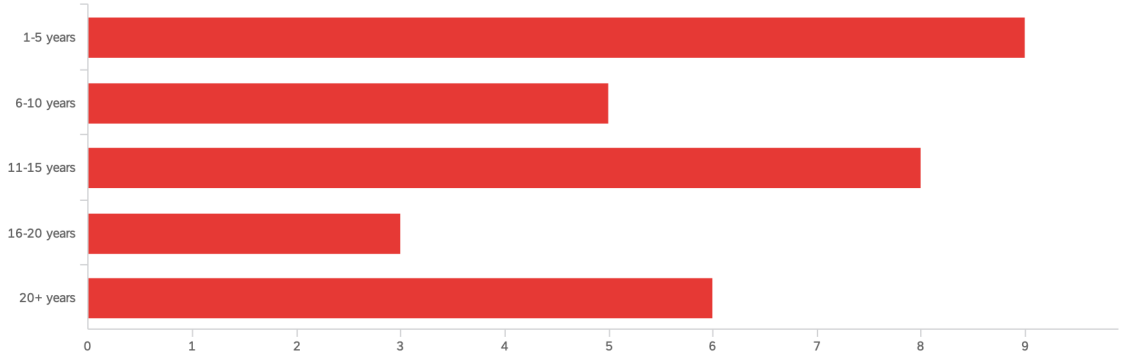
Appendix 1



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How old are you?	3.00	7.00	5.63	1.24	1.55	32

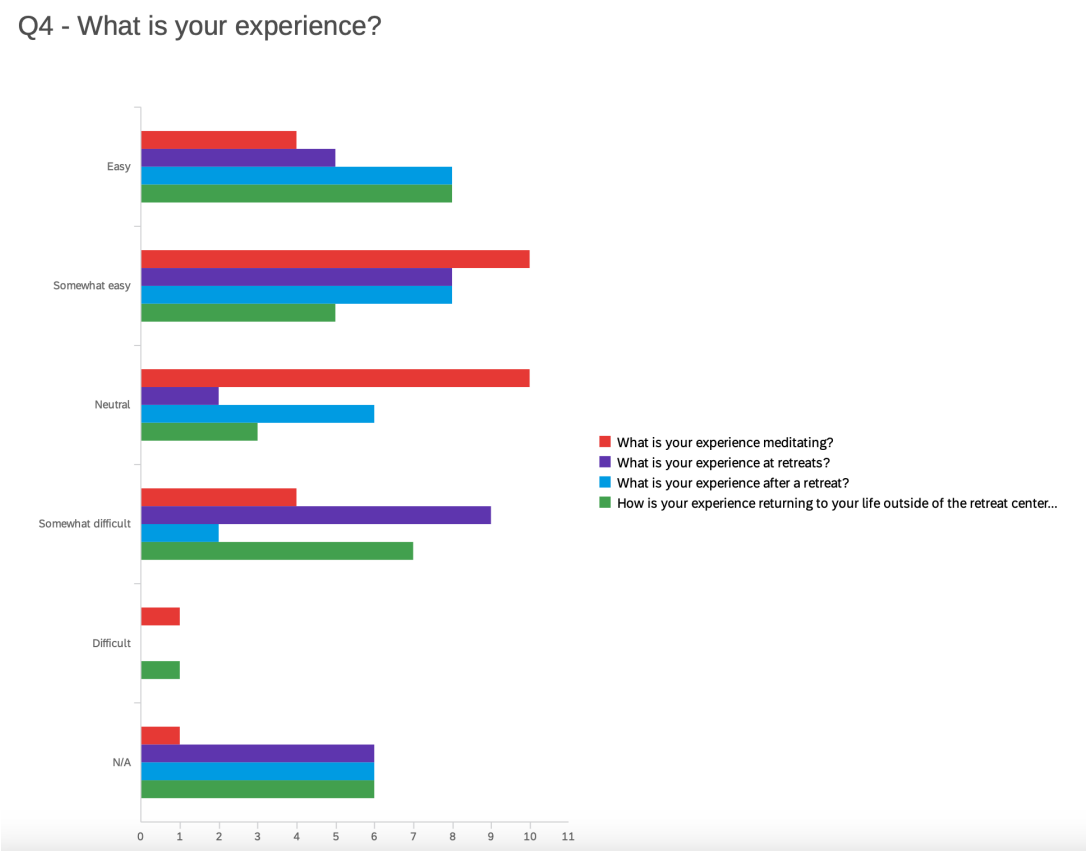
Appendix 2

Q3 - How long have you practiced zazen?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How long have you practiced zazen?	1.00	6.00	3.45	1.83	3.34	31

Appendix 3

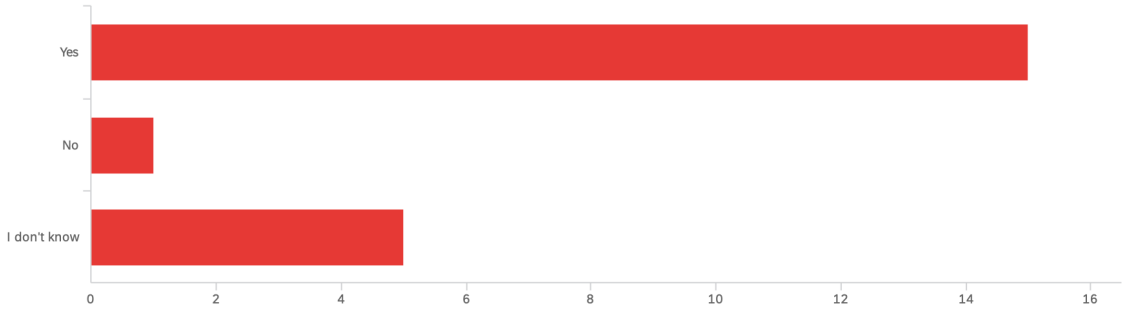


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What is your experience meditating?	1.00	6.00	2.70	1.16	1.34	30
2	What is your experience at retreats?	1.00	6.00	3.30	1.72	2.94	30
3	What is your experience after a retreat?	1.00	6.00	2.87	1.78	3.18	30
4	How is your experience returning to your life outside of the retreat center?	1.00	6.00	3.20	1.83	3.36	30

#	Field	Easy	Somewhat easy	Neutral	Somewhat difficult	Difficult	N/A	Total
1	What is your experience meditating?	13.33% 4	33.33% 10	33.33% 10	13.33% 4	3.33% 1	3.33% 1	30
2	What is your experience at retreats?	16.67% 5	26.67% 8	6.67% 2	30.00% 9	0.00% 0	20.00% 6	30
3	What is your experience after a retreat?	26.67% 8	26.67% 8	20.00% 6	6.67% 2	0.00% 0	20.00% 6	30
4	How is your experience returning to your life outside of the retreat center?	26.67% 8	16.67% 5	10.00% 3	23.33% 7	3.33% 1	20.00% 6	30

Appendix 4

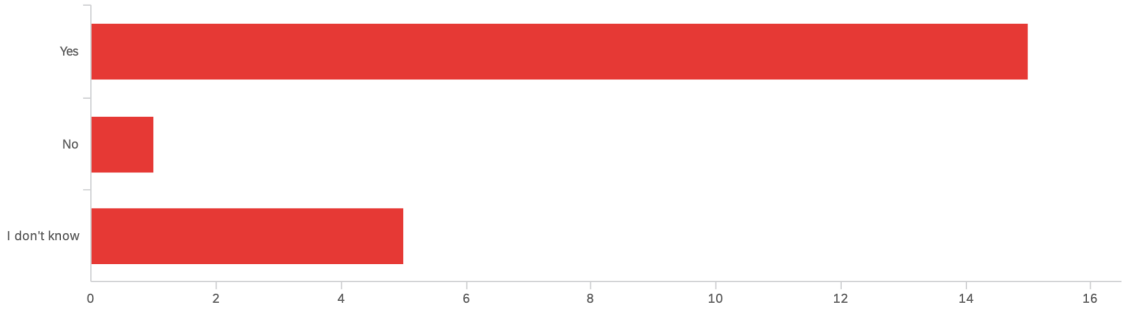
Q6 - Do you feel like your needs are understood by your teacher?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Do you feel like your needs are understood by your teacher?	1.00	3.00	1.52	0.85	0.73	21

Appendix 5

Q7 - Do you feel like the teachings you receive by your teacher further your practice positively?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Do you feel like the teachings you receive by your teacher further your practice positively?	1.00	3.00	1.52	0.85	0.73	21

Appendix 6

Q10#1 - Do you study, read, listen to any of these teachers? - Teachers

#	Field	Yes		No		Total
1	D.T. Suzuki	50.00%	8	50.00%	8	16
2	Shunryu Suzuki	93.75%	15	6.25%	1	16
3	Alan Watts	47.06%	8	52.94%	9	17
4	Charlotte Joko Beck	68.75%	11	31.25%	5	16
5	Jack Kornfield	50.00%	8	50.00%	8	16
6	Josh Korda	33.33%	5	66.67%	10	15
7	Noah Levine	13.33%	2	86.67%	13	15
8	Tara Brach	47.06%	8	52.94%	9	17
9	Brad Warner	70.59%	12	29.41%	5	17
10	Flint Sparks	31.25%	5	68.75%	11	16

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