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INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TANTO

General Information

Tanto means 'head of the tan,' the sitting platform. This seat is occupied by a trusted and senior member of the assembly, whose responsibility (for a given period of time) is to oversee practice in the practice hall. Among the four leaders, the Tanto has the final say on all matters affecting the tenor of practice. His or her authority is to be carried with full respect for the responsibilities and observations of the other leaders and exercised in concert and consultation with the teacher.

If at all possible, the tanto should be a person who has served long enough in other leadership posts to know by heart what those jobs entail and how the whole system works. He or she should be prepared to answer the questions of the other leaders or to fill in for them at a moment's notice, if need be.

Consciously or unconsciously, members of the sangha look to the tanto as a model of mature Zen practice. This increases the weight of the responsibility and adds to the challenge of serving as tanto, especially as it tends to arouse conscious or unconscious feelings and attitudes we ourselves have about leading, selfimage, confidence, authority, inadequacy and so forth. Practicing as tanto thus tends to be both loaded and illuminating, both tricky and worthwhile. Practice hard, care for the sangha, and maintain the spirit of "passing unnoticed in the world."

The Altar

Zen Buddhists have long manifested ostensibly contradictory attitudes regarding altars, images, and ceremonies. On one hand, we cherish the memory of the monk who tossed a wooden Buddha on the fire when the firewood ran out and of Senzaki Nyogen referring to his altar "that table over there." These are ordinary things and to act as if they belonged to a category of sacred objects only creates a nasty stink and misleads good people. On the other hand, like all things, these are particular objects, and we treat them particularly, in accord with their nature. We treat dirty socks appropriately and altar figures appropriately. In the case of Buddhas, this generally means showing them care and respect, but on a particular occasion, it might mean tossing them into the fire.

Movement Around the Altar

As the foregoing suggests, the tanto walks a line between tending the altar matteroffactly and respectfully. When passing before the altar (to offer incense, pick up the stick, or whatever), it's customary to face it, sidestepping to the center. Don't let this or other movements at the altar become stiff or obsessive. Don't dawdle either. Just do what you're there to do, simply, modestly and in accord with the time-honored forms.

Care of the Altar

It's your job to clean the altar. This should be done the first chance you get before any sitting or sesshin starts. In cleaning the altar, check for bug droppings, spider webs, etc. Remove old or inappropriate offerings. (See "Offerings" below.) See to it that the lights (lamp, candles) are ready, trimmed, and clean.

Offerings

It's also your job to make most offerings on behalf of the sangha. The customary offerings are three water, plant matter, and incense. Sometimes fruit is offered in addition. The offering of plant matter need not consist of flowers or be showy: dry grasses, sprigs of pine, or other things are fine, and are best if local, seasonal, and wild or homegrown. For a sesshin or major ceremony, give extra care to the plant offering, either obtaining it yourself or asking someone else in advance to provide it.

Removing offerings is your job too. This includes the food offerings made by the noon cook if he or she forgets to remove it after the meal. Also you may remove any impromptu offerings (feathers, stones, etc.) that seem inappropriate to you; this is a judgment call that's yours to make. In midsesshin, if an inappropriate offering appears, it may be best to leave it, at least for a while, to avoid upsetting whoever presented it. In any case, whenever you remove an offering, take it outdoors and dispose of it respectfully with gassho. Never put offerings in the trash or compost.

Incense

- a. Storage: Keep unused incense out of view to avoid calling attention to it. For quick, quiet access, you may want to keep a small amount near your cushion.
- b. Timing: The traditional practice was to offer incense at the beginning of every period and to time the period by its burning. Out of concern for people who are very sensitive to smoke, often in the Diamond Sangha incense is offered every other period instead. Since the short sticks used for this purpose last roughly 35 minutes, they burn part way through the following period. Another solution is to light half a stick each period. It's up to you but please be mindful of sensitivities sangha members might have. At sesshin, ask during cautions if anyone sitting near the altar has allergies or other conditions likely to be affected by the incense, and if so, adjust offerings accordingly. If anyone says they're seriously affected by the smoke, ask the jisha to consider changing the seating after cautions adjourn. (It's better not to get into seat swapping in the middle of cautions. It can be disruptive and invite focus on personal preferences.)
- c. Procedure: After lighting the stick from the candle flame, put it out with a single wave of the hand, lift it to your forehead holding it near the base with both hands, and then, using one hand, insert it deeply enough into the ash so it won't fall over. Gassho and make a standing bow.

d. Maintenance of the pot: Be careful not to compress the ash. An incense stick stays upright very nicely as long as the ash is deep enough, and compacting it makes it harder to insert the stick. At the beginning of sesshin or anytime the pot gets full, sift it, discard the incense butts, and pour the clean ash back into the pot the looser and fluffier, the better. Set aside excess ash in a separate container.

e. Sharing ash: Offer the excess to sangha members for their home incense pots. Keep an eye out especially for newcomers who may be setting up a home altar for the first time. This is a nice metaphor for sangha relations and can be especially useful as a way of helping solo sifters feel connected to the group.

Altar Lights

The smaller light (lamp or candle) should be lit at the beginning of sitting as soon as, or even before, the denso sounds and it stays lit until sitting adjourns. If the tanto has to tend to something else before starting zazen, he or she should come in first, light the light, and offer incense. This helps to establish the dojo and avoids noisiness once people have begun sitting. (If the tanto is absent, the first leader to enter the dojo should light it and offer incense.)

The larger light (candle) is lit for dharma assembly, meals, sutras, kentan, closing ceremony, and the like. Light it ahead of time, before the relevant period begins; avoid lighting it in midperiod, as this is needlessly intrusive. During sesshin, light it first thing in the morning, and leave it burning until you finish kentan. Likewise, before the final period at night, light it after the final kinhin and leave it going for your kentan and throughout the period so that it needn't be relit for closing ceremonies.

In extinguishing candles, be careful not to blow hot wax all over the altar! Snuff them out with your fingers (slightly moistened), cup your hand behind the wick and blow, or whatever just don't spray the wax, please!

Carrying the Stick

The kyosaku (awakening stick) is the sword of Manjushri, which cuts off delusion. It's administered only on request in this dojo. For some people, particularly those who've suffered traumatic physical abuse, even the tanto's passing by with stick in hand, not to mention hitting them with it, can be a highly charged experience. It's very important to convey that you carry it with deference and care, offering it only as a skillful means by which students can further their own practice. Of course, it's also important to administer the stick well, so practicing to give a consistently clean, crisp blow is essential before serving as tanto at a major sesshin.

a. Procedure: Get an experienced tanto to teach you the basics of how to accept the stick from the altar, make bows with it, carry it, and give blows. Please adhere to these forms exactly, avoiding the introduction of variations (alternate postures for receiving the stick, gestures to indicate placement of the blow, etc.) that would complicate the procedure. As with other dojo forms, simplicity and transparency are of paramount value. Though empathy for the suffering sitter may seem to demand departure from the form, the prime result of complicating the procedure is creation of new hooks for distraction: "Shall I ask for it once or twice?" Or "Gee, I really like it when X is tanto!" Or "How come Y doesn't do it the way X did?" Etc., etc. planning, obsessing about the body, getting into all sorts of personal preferences. In the long run, this isn't merciful.

We strike three times on each shoulder in winter (anytime it's cold enough that most people are heavily padded with clothing) and twice the rest of the time. While a tanto may occasionally carry the kyosaku out to the interview line, this is done simply as a way of reminding people to practice; no blows are to be administered there. Carry the stick with the inscription facing you, and hit with the opposite side. Unless you really need to check out someone's bone structure, avoid touching people with your hands before hitting them; such touches may disturb people more than the thwack of the stick itself.

b. Timing: This is something for the tanto to sense, but except in unusual cases, the following guidelines can be trusted: Don't offer the stick during the first period of a sitting block or the first period following sutras, dharma assembly, or other such events. Wait 10-15 minutes into a period before getting up to begin a round; this allows the group to settle and increases the chances people will want to be hit. Don't wait too long, though. Ideally, the tanto gets seated (and the dojo gets quiet again) 5 minutes or so before kinhin.

c. Frequency: We generally offer the stick every other period. If the group seems to need extra support, you may want to carry it more often—two out of three periods, say. Carrying it every period is extreme and noticeable, calling attention to the tanto and to whatever condition she or he is responding to. Likewise, a tanto may also find it appropriate to offer the stick less frequently—just one out of three periods, say. If a tanto wants a break from kyosaku duty, it's preferable to ask the ino (or another leader) to carry the stick rather than to stop offering it for a while.

Kentan

This literally means "seeing the tan" (the same ken as in kensho, plus the word that designates the sitting bench). It formally signifies the opening and closing of the dojo, but it's not mere formality. It's inspecting the sangha to make sure all are present, to pick up cues about how they're doing, and to correct conditions in the dojo (e.g., lighting, heat), if necessary. Do look!

Should you notice that someone is missing, a whisper (or a wordless question) to the jisha is appropriate. It is the jisha's responsibility to go in search of them.

The room should be completely settled when kentan occurs. Don't rush the beginning. If someone comes back unexpectedly after you've begun, they should halt, absolutely still, at the door (preferably outside the door) until you're finished. If they don't, then you should stop at the next corner you come to and wait until the hall returns to stillness.

Get an experienced tanto to show you how the stick is carried for kentan. Move briskly and quietly, pausing briefly (perhaps one inhalation and exhalation) at each of your turns. A pace too fast or

too slow and lingering too long at the turns calls undue attention to you. Again, aim for transparency.

Newcomers

If anyone unfamiliar or unexpected comes, it's the jisha's job to deal with them. But if the jisha is out of the hall or if it seems probable that the person will need instruction in zazen and procedures, the tanto may need to step in. Before zazen begins or at kinhin, invite the newcomer outside (with a gesture or a whisper), lead him or her to an outoftheway spot, and make friendly contact. If instructions are needed, take a few minutes there and then, getting a zafu and zabuton from inside, if necessary, to demonstrate postures and to help the person find a satisfactory way to sit.

Guidance about Posture

Don't hesitate to help inexperienced sitters to enhance their posture. A few firm but light, matterofact touches at the shoulder, base of the spine, or crown of the head can be really helpful. Although it is generally not a good idea to touch a person's face, if the chin is too far forward you may help by putting the kyosaku vertically on the spine and gently encouraging the back of the head to line up with it using a light touch to the center of the forehead. Even if the person soon returns to a contorted posture, leave him or her alone for a while; too much help will make for selfconsciousness. If someone needs more guidance than can be given in the dojo during zazen, offer coaching on posture outside (see above: Newcomers) or after sitting ends.

For veteran sitters, corrections are occasionally appropriate and helpful, but in this case, it's wise to err on the side of caution. Some of us fall into habitual postures that may not look right but that work somehow and shouldn't be tinkered with. Respect this. All corrections to posture are made without either the tanto and the recipient doing bows or gassho.

SesshinGeneral

All the responsibilities of the tanto are magnified by the circumstances of sesshin. Especially during major sesshin, that tanto needs to work closely with the teacher to provide appropriate support to attendees and to maintain a good tone in the room (and during work and rest, too). Help set the tone by getting to the zendo promptly when the densho begins to sound, lighting incense (lamp, etc.), and starting to sit. Leave the zendo as little as possible. Have no hesitation about going to interview, of course, stepping to the head of the line even if you'd rather not. You're needed in the hall!

Sesshin Preparation

Once you've accepted the tanto job, it's your task to assemble the leadership team. Consult the sesshin signup list, the current leadership pools, and Nelson to get a group that's balanced and liked to inspire confidence. Gender is an important factor to keep in mind as you select leaders, with an even malefemale balance optimal but not essential. A mix of more and less experienced leaders is also desirable. The presence of newer leaders brings fresh energy to the leadership team and the sesshin while also making clear that the sangha is socially open, without a 'ruling class.' The presence of veteran leaders lends stability to the sesshin and enables the newer leaders to break in under secure conditions, with old hands to turn to when questions or crises arise. The balance

should tilt more toward veterans on the longer seated sesshin, more toward novice leaders on the shorter seated sesshin.

After selecting a team, contact the prospective members to ask if they've willing to serve. If they are, remind them (a) to get and study the appropriate job file at least a few days before sesshin and (b) to arrive in time to deal with their share of presesshin work, to help create a friendly, settled atmosphere, and to attend the leaders' meeting, if you've scheduled one. (Nelson definitely wants a leaders' meeting before the longer seated sesshin and likes to have one before the shorter seated sesshin, too, if feasible. For sangha sesshin, it's the tanto's call.) Inform the sesshin organizer who the jisha will be so that late signup changes can be communicated to him or her directly.

Other: Think over any special needs that might come up this sesshin, occasioned by weather, newcomers, physical ailments, etc. Also consider cautions that might need to be emphasized, and note them either for inclusion in you words at cautions or, if they fall in another leaders' area, for discussion at the leaders' meeting before sesshin. As part of your responsibility for tending the altar, it's your job to provide the offering of grasses, flowers, or other plant matter. (See the Offering section, above.)

The last page of this manual contains a typical schedule for pre-sesshin activities.

Gathering for Sesshin

It's essential that the tanto and other leaders arrive promptly, if not early. (see preceding section). All sesshin leaders should greet and get acquainted with attendees they don't know so that people will feel comfortable with the leadership team. This is especially important for the tanto to do.

Sesshin Cautions

You take the lead in this, and the tone you set friendly, clear, sure of procedures and of yourself, modest, light but also serious is very important. The portion of the cautions that the tanto gives is elsewhere in this manual. Basically, your part is to lay out the basics. Don't do it by rote! Pitch your cautions appropriately for the group attending the particular sesshin, and find your own words and way of getting the points across. Contemplate in advance if there are items of form that we've been slipping up on lately, and either mention them during your part of cautions or ask one of the other leaders to handle it, as appropriate. (Please note, though, that it's not necessarily appropriate to add such items to the permanent list of cautions.)

One of the things the tanto does for the group is make clear what cautions are. Sometimes the word rules has been used, which may upset those particularly sensitive to authoritarianism. On the other hand, calling the guidelines, as has also been done, is misleading because it makes them sound more open to personal interpretation than they are. Cautions are the way things are done at our house during sesshin, and it should be clear that everyone needs to accept them as such and do their best to maintain them. Encourage attendees who have any concerns about the cautions as delivered to raise them for clarification and resolution there and then.

Cautions vary depending on the group and the circumstances. They typically include:

1. Greeting

Welcome, with perhaps some acknowledgement of newcomers.

Describe tanto role – ‘As tanto I am responsible for ...’

Introduction to sesshin

Special circumstances where we set aside busyness of everyday life.

Describe what cautions are. Sesshin forms, routines, rules and how they work for us.

2. Three main cautions

No talking.

No looking around.

No social greetings.

3. Other Cautions (depending on circumstances and participants)

No worrying about the coming and going of others. Leaders will take care of this and other details of sesshin. Use leaders if you need to. Seek help if necessary.

No clocks, let go of time concerns.

No reading.

Careful with coughs and sneezes so as to prevent the spread of germs. Show how to sneeze into the elbow.

Seasonal tips.

Take good care of your health. Ask about physical ailments.

Description of receiving the stick and of posture adjustment

Wear dark, unpatterned clothing

Be prompt

4. Other leaders speak their cautions.

5. Final encouragement.

Speaking in the Dojo

This is virtually never done outside of sesshin and rarely done even then, only a couple of times per day. Keeps remarks succinct, plain, encouraging. Avoid flowery language, artificiality (sweetness, gruffness), and anything that might create hooks for comparison, self-reproach, etc. Ideally, your words should drop into the quiet waters of the dojo without a splash, causing barely a ripple. Avoid making them memorable but do make them (1) audible for all and (2) applicable to all so that nobody will feel either left out or singled out for special attention.

This part of the job can be fearsome. If it's not at least somewhat unsettling for you, you're probably out of touch with your feelings about it, the responsibility it entails, or both. As for what to say, ideally, words in the dojo touch on both the essential and the practical. For instance, "The Way is wide open right now. (Pause.) Let your senses be open, no gap between me and notme, inside and outside."

Beware of laying something on the group. Let the atmosphere of the room guide your words, and consult your own experience—what you've heard that's been helpful to you, things you've discovered in your own practice, etc. If nothing comes to mind, ask for suggestions from Nelson or other leaders (during a leaders' meeting), but make sure to speak in your own words, not someone else's.

Shouts and other startling noises are better left to the teacher. If you feel inclined to make one, by all means check your idea out beforehand with the teacher. Never make such a noise toward the end of a sesshin, as it can be deeply unsettling for people, and often a lot of sitting and interview time is needed in order to integrate the experience.

Themes for Speaking in the Dojo

Before sesshin begins you may wish to explore themes for speaking in the zendo, leafing through, for example, Aitken Roshi's 'Encouraging Words.' Other examples are provided below, listed in no particular order and to be used as a point of reference only. Speak to the condition of the room and always remember that how you speak is at least as important as what you say. Keep it simple, brief. Leave as little trace as possible in your hearers' minds. Don't give them anything to compare themselves against or to beat themselves up with!

1. Stillness. Sitting still like Fudo, the immovable wisdom king discovering what doesn't move, doesn't come or go.
2. Lightness. Carry your practice lightly allow it to carry you, *avoid* grimness, go easy but steady.
3. Relax body and mind [give detailed reminders of *body* parts to relax] loosen and settle, soften, no need to steel yourself against pain or fatigue - allow it, surrender to the breath, the walk [kinhin] no need to exert control.
4. Let go into breath, posture, eating, all the forms of sesshin, sink into sesshin, trust yourself, trust the process, forget yourself.

5. Let go into the sesshin rhythm, get into the swing, into the ancient groove, take each moment in stride, everything's taken care of so you can forget yourself.
6. Time. Forget hours and days, the circling hands of the clock, plunge into vertical time, the infinite depths of the moment. Don't wait! Sometimes we give up, halfconsciously thinking "I'll just last this out and be fresher in the morning," but now's the time. Tired zazen, sleepy zazen may be 100%. Not a moment to waste, no time like the present, each moment a universe, utterly unique.
7. Returning. The life of practice is one of returning and returning again. Wandering is natural, when you catch yourself adrift, just turn back. No praise, no blame just turn back gently.
8. Forget yourself. Let body and mind fall away, abandon everyday concerns completely for the time being
9. Distractions. Use all sounds, sights, sensations - include them in the breathmoment.
10. Mind of discovery. Openness, freshness, not habituation, surprise.
11. Right here. Don't search elsewhere - "Like a person in the midst of water, crying out in thirst."
12. Get out of control mode, give way to your practice [count, Mu, etc.] Your body and mind are wild, and we don't seek to subdue them to force breath into a routine or to eradicate thought. Breathe naturally.

Sangha Sesshin

A teacher may or may not be present for sangha sesshin. In either case, the tanto bears extra responsibility for such sesshin as the only person who will be actively maintaining a watch on the sangha. Since sangha sesshin are relatively brief and relaxed, they usually aren't the occasion for realization experiences or for major emotional releases. It has happened, however, and the tanto has to be alert to the possibility. (It's a good idea to check with Nelson before sesshin to see if there's anyone in particular to look out for.) In the event something does occur, intervene directly if you feel confident enough but go no further than reassurance and/or encouragement. If the situation is more than you can handle, get Nelson (or a veteran tanto) involved. Take no chances here.

It's the tanto's responsibility to determine what will occur during the time usually allocated for Dharma Assembly. If you opt for Dharma Assembly, it's up to you either to lead it yourself or to find someone else to do the honors. There's no reason it need be the tanto, but don't be shy, either. This is a valuable opportunity for the sangha to hear what its members have to offer and for individuals to express their understanding. It's a good idea to consult Nelson about who's done it in the past and who might be up for doing it this time. It's also possible to invite a teacher for another center, but definitely consult Nelson if you want to consider this possibility.

End of Sesshin

Announce the end of sesshin in a very plain and simple manner – For example,

“The ‘conditions’ of our practice are about to make a change – we’re transitioning from no talking and no looking around over to full-on everything! Some like it quiet, others boisterous. If we err, let’s err on the side of quiet – respecting those who like to make the transition more slowly.”

Then describe the schedule of events, as determined at the final leader’s meeting.

Typical Pre-Sesshin Schedule

Time Before Sesshin	Task
Weeks	
4	Get participant list - discuss people and jobs with Nelson Review ‘Instructions to Tanto’ and edit notes for tanto position Choose leaders Contact tenzo
3	Contact jiki, ino, and jisha Develop themes for encouraging words in zendo Develop cautions
2	Touch base with leaders as needed
Days	
7	Practice with altar, flowers and candles
6	Continue developing cautions and encouraging words Read schedules Touch base with all leaders
3	Finish preparations
Hours	
3 (2:00 PM)	Arrive at zendo, get settled as much as possible Greet people as they arrive and help them settle Clean and prepare zendo altar, check candles Review evening schedule
1.5 (3:30 PM)	Leader’s meeting
0 (5:00 PM)	Work meeting