



Dharma Rain
Zen Center

Dharma School Handbook 2024-2025 for Parents

The Dharma Garden Council oversees all programs that serve youth and families of the sangha. These include Dharma School, Dharma Camp, and other Youth and Family Programs. The primary focus of these programs is to support children and families: their spiritual development, well-being and growth; and to encourage and support young people's inherent Buddha nature through community, compassion, sharing and joy. The council cultivates these programs to support a vibrant and thriving broader Dharma Rain Sangha by offering to people of all ages a way into dharma and practice. Dharma Garden seeks to express and cultivate the values of mindfulness, compassion, loving-kindness and connection.

The goals of Dharma School are to provide each child with the following:

- Support for feeling accepted and valued as a member of the sangha
- A peer group that has a common interest in spiritual practice and Buddhist values
- Comfort with meditation techniques and broader spiritual practice
- Understanding and familiarity with Buddhist terms, ideas, symbols, and the altar
- Participation in religious ceremonies and celebrations
- Opportunities to express interests through art and music

Much of our teaching comes from the culture created around our programs, rather than from the actual lesson plans. Our teachers practice cultivating friendliness, acceptance, cooperation, and listening. One of the most important elements in teaching compassion and generosity is to make sure children feel safe and appreciated.

Our teachers are all volunteers who are established members at the center. We appreciate your understanding and patience in areas in which we may not be able to meet every individual's needs. In addition, if you have a child under 12, we request that you stay on the property and let us know where you will be, so that we can contact you if we need assistance.

Curriculum

Our goal is not to ensure that our kids have a particular knowledge base and background in Buddhism, and it is certainly not to turn them all into Buddhists. We do care that they are exposed to this teaching and that they recognize values such as simplicity and taking care of others, sharing, preserving resources, and so on. We hope that they have absorbed some guidance about how one can deal with suffering.

Many children are affected by their participation in Dharma School and feel that their time in this kind of atmosphere, having these kind of role models, helps them learn to act with more wisdom and compassion at times in their lives.

Dharma School culture strives to prioritize the following:

- an atmosphere of respect and care for all beings and things;
- an openness to spiritual devotion and concern;
- a support for deep questioning;
- a value for calm, equanimity and silence;
- a conviction that each person has buddha-nature and is fundamentally good;
- a dedication to acting responsibly, compassionately and morally;
- an acceptance of difficulty and struggle as being an essential part of a rich path;
- an honesty and humility about our own mistakes, and
- a realistic but strong optimism about the world

2024 Dharma School Staff

Group Name	Age	Location	Teachers
Preschool	2.5-5 years	Library	Carrie Schultz & Kristin Miller
Willow	Kindergarten & 1st Grade	Room 4	Heather Hynes & Brenda Niedert
Dogwood	2nd & 3rd Grade	Room 2	Thomas Albanese & Myffy Hopkins
Cedar	4th - 7th Grade	Room 3	San'in Derr & Emily Vollmer
Doug Fir	Middle & High School	The Grass Hut	Flying Fish Murphy (fall) & Minshu Dorne (spring)

Parents Group and Dharma Garden Director

Shin'yu Vitells, Shinyu@Dharma-Rain.org

Administration

Jennifer Bass, Jen@Dharma-Rain.org

The [Dharma Garden Council](#) serves to guide and administer the Dharma Garden programs, and can be contacted at DharmaGarden@Dharma-Rain.org.

Cultivating Harmony in the Classroom: Supporting Teachers and Students

We encourage harmony in the classroom by developing Ground Rules for each class and posting them, by practicing deep listening, and by practicing the Sacred Pause. If these supports are not adequate, we encourage teachers to guide the students through a practice called Beginning Anew. If a student is still struggling, teachers will contact the Dharma Garden Council and we will collaborate with the parents on a personalized plan to support this student. If these supports are not adequate, we may need to consider taking a longer pause, relocating a student or discontinuing enrollment.

Below are some resources on Deep Listening, the Sacred Pause, and Beginning Anew. We encourage teachers and parents to familiarize themselves with these practices, so that we can all move along a spiritual path together.

[The Sacred Art of Listening - Tara Brach](#)

[The Sacred Pause | Psychology Today](#), or [The Sacred Pause - Tara Brach](#)
[Beginning Anew](#), Dharma Rain Training offered on this, date TBD

Dharma School Ceremonies, from Gyokuko's Dharma School Manual

Ceremonies and ritual play a major role in Zen, as in most religions. Many of our ceremonies were created by a Japanese ancestor in our lineage named Keizan, who was influential in popularizing Soto Zen amongst the “common” – usually illiterate and uneducated – people in Japan, where it had previously been a religious practice for educated monastics. Ceremonies can convey complex and deep teachings to those who could not understand (or would not listen to) a verbal explanation of those teachings. They can also make our experience of a teaching personal and real as we move physically through the ritual.

Ceremonies are ideal for children, who seem to take readily and easily to the sacred and ritual space. A regular sequence of ceremonies also marks times of the year and brings all of the age groups together into a community. The youngest kids are literally brimming over with excitement as they bathe the baby buddha in sweet tea or walk over a zendo floor strewn with tissue paper lotus petals. They may look around or squirm or hide their faces behind their parent's legs, but usually betray great curiosity. As kids get familiar with the ceremonies they seem to take a certain pride and comfort in knowing what comes next and how to participate. Ceremonial positions (chant leader, candle bearer, priest's assistant, procession leader) are usually filled by high school students.

Dharma School Ceremony List

Sejiki Ceremony (October) – Sejiki is our annual Soto Zen “Festival of the Hungry Ghosts.” After Dharma School singing and a short class, we join the adult sangha. Older children dress up as hungry ghosts who cannot find sustenance and so are constantly thirsty and hungry. Younger students instruct the ghosts in proper forms, and offerings of tasty foods are placed on the altar. Sejiki is also a time to remember people who have recently passed away

Rohatsu (December) - This is the most serious ceremony for the kids. It is a variant on Jodo, ritual questioning of the abbot. The children will have been primed by their teachers and parents to think of a question, and one at a time, (or with a supporting hand if necessary), children may go up and ask the abbot a question. This can be very scary, but also can be very inspiring, both for those asking the question and the observers.

Nehan (February) - In this ceremony we celebrate the Buddha’s death. We will gather around the Parinirvana statue of Shakyamuni and gently talk about his story, and also our stories. We will then write (or draw, for the younger ones) about the death of someone we knew, maybe a grandparent or a pet. We will then go outside and offer our drawings and writings to a fire. We'll finish our ceremony by chanting the Heart Sutra in Sino-Japanese.

Dharma School Jukai (March) - In Zen Buddhism, an adult formally becomes a Buddhist in the ceremony of Jukai. Jukai is the "taking of the precepts," in which someone vows to live by the moral and ethical guidelines of Buddhism. In this Dharma School version, we provide an opportunity for older children to take refuge and set an intention to develop their compassion and wisdom for the next year. First time students taking Jukai are given a mala (prayer beads).

Wesak Ceremony (May) – Wesak (pronounced Vay-sock) commemorates the birth of Shakyamuni. This ceremony has a big procession involving tossing lotus petals and chanting, as well as everyone pouring tea over a baby Buddha statue that the kids have decorated with flowers. At the end, young volunteers try to knock open a paper maché elephant (“Zeñata”) that has been filled with goodies.

SKITS - These aren’t exactly a ceremony, but they are a big to-do at the end of the Dharma School year. Each group offers a brief performance or presentation for the adult sangha in place of the normal Dharma Talk.

“One of the tools we have for teaching the dharma to children (or adults) is to show how we carry our understanding of the dharma into our interactions with people, animals and things. Therefore, the most important aspect of the dharma school program is often not the “program” itself but the culture created around the program.”