

# MONDO PRACTICE INSTRUCTIONS

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## **Introduction**

Our practice of *mondo* is based on a ceremony called *hossen*, which is what the chief junior (*shuso*) does at the end of his or her term. He or she presents a verse that represents their understanding, and all the people present question them about the verse. It is a significant step in which the shuso presents publicly what has been, up until then, a fairly private practice.

For our mondo practice we do a somewhat modified version of *hossen*. A person who wants to do this practice will pick a verse that has meaning for them from a text the group has studied together. The presenter gives the verse to one person ahead of time, who then prepares to ask the first question and get the ball rolling. After that, other people can ask a question of the person making the presentation.

Mondo is sometimes called dharma battle or dharma combat., but think of it as dharma combat in the way in which a martial arts exercise is combat. A martial arts exercise is almost like a dance in which you test your strength and balance and find out where you're off balance. It's not a test primarily about winning or losing, it's a test of learning that points out what you need for growth as well as your degree of mastery of the art. In the East, mondo as dharma combat has evolved into a couple of different forms or styles. One is completely scripted. There's no spontaneity in terms of what's actually said. Everyone has an exact script of what to say. It's something like formal tea ceremony in the effort to get the feel of it exactly right, within the scripted form. Another style of it is highly combative and dramatic. There's pounding on the floor and knocking each other over the head. I think these are two extremes. One side has gotten very formalistic and the other side has gotten very dramatic, neither of which are what we're trying to do here.

A good mondo exercise is not where one person defeats another. This is not the point. It works perfectly when "two arrows meet in mid-air" as the verse in our morning service says - one arrow from the questioner, one from the presenter. When we do this, each person can benefit.

The benefit to the person presenting the verse and receiving the questions is that, a lot of times, it is through the questions that we find out ways we relate to the teaching that we weren't even aware of. Often, amazing things happen through the exchange. Sometimes you give an answer and find you have a way of responding you had never even thought of before. When we ask questions in mondo we benefit because we test ourselves as to how well we can understand what the presenter is about. As questioners (and listeners), we benefit from seeing unique ways of expressing this teaching and practice that are different from our own.

## **Presenting a Verse**

When you choose a verse, remember you're not looking for a clever insight or an intellectual understanding but something you really relate to on a gut level. Be prepared to answer, "Why is this verse important to you? What dharma has been revealed to you through this verse?" Sometimes in your practice you'll be going along and a verse suddenly starts to resonate for you and it is a doorway into something. That's what we're looking for, the personal and very deep connection to the verse that has made a difference.

When being questioned, then, you stick to your own, real experience of what *you* think the teaching means. Don't get drawn into a discussion of some other topic, or into

some agenda the questioner might have. Sometimes the best answer is, “I don’t know” or, “I don’t feel like that relates to this verse.” You do not need to be an expert or feel you are fully enlightened to take the mondo seat. You are not presenting all of the Dharma. You are presenting *your* dharma, your understanding. In this way you and your practice are seen by the community in a very intimate way. It can be somewhat intimidating, but when the sangha holds us compassionately it can also be healing and empowering.

Occasionally a questioner is tangled up in his or her own experience and is not really listening to the experience of the presenter. For example, you may be presenting a verse on emptiness because that is where your training is at the moment, but a questioner is depressed and doesn’t want to hear about emptiness. The questioner may want to hear about life and brightness and affirmations. In this case presenter and questioner can end up sawing back and forth, or come to an impasse. Then the mondo stops working and starts being two people trying to further their agendas. A good presenter, in this kind of case, is able to step forward just a bit from their own position and help the questioner see beyond the apparent duality of the situation. For example, you may be able to give something to such a questioner that is sympathetic or gentle.

### **Asking Questions**

As a questioner, you try to test the presenter in the way in which you might test a friendship. I don’t mean manipulatively, but in the sense that you want to see where the firmness is and where the boundaries are. In that sense you ask a challenging question to give the person something to respond to. That’s where this gets a little bit like the martial arts exercise. Without the challenge, it’s difficult to see the depth of the person’s relationship to the verse, to the teaching, to the dharma and to the practice. That’s where it’s helpful to create an obstacle or a difficulty for the person to respond to.

We used say at the monastery that sometimes the questioner’s job is to help the person hit the mark. Sometimes when more senior people were present and someone rather new to the practice was presenting, you could almost hear what they were trying to do and see what the obstacle was. It’s not exactly like lobbing a softball, but you phrase the question in such a way that you help lead them toward the door that they are looking for. In that regard the questioner can really aid the person in finding that spot.

There’s another way in which the questioner is challenged, and that is in trying to really hear what the presenter’s relationship to the dharma is all about. You try to understand it so that you can ask the right question. You try to come into harmony with the presenter so that the question and answer are on the same wave length. We are trying to meet each other - two minds meeting. The questioner, too, has to come forward, or there’s no chance of this.

Sometimes someone will present a verse and you kind of go, “Huh? What is this all about?” In a situation like that you don’t have to have some intuitive insight into what the person is trying to present or some knowledge about that type of dharma yourself. What you can do then is simply ask the obvious questions. You can ask about specific terms or words in the verse or phrase of teaching. For example, someone presents the phrase from Dogen: “The everyday life of the Buddha is simply eating rice and drinking tea.” You can ask questions like, “What is eating rice? What is drinking tea? What is everyday life? What is Buddha?” You can be very simple and direct, and let the presenter come forward with what the verse means to them. Then you have something to work with. You can ask another obvious question like, “Why this verse?” That’s getting right down to it. Or, “What does this mean to you? Tell me.”

Here's an example of moving into the space where someone's verse is coming from. The verse used was, "Think of neither good nor evil; consider neither right nor wrong." People began challenging this with, "What about this?" and "What about that?" The presenter kept coming back to, "I don't know. Think of neither good nor evil, consider neither right nor wrong." She was trying to communicate her experience of coming to the place where, no matter what else you know, ultimately you're going to have to give up considerations of good and evil, right or wrong. The verse was really vital to her, as she was recognizing that ultimately you always end up there in some way. What I felt I needed to do in that situation was to see where she was with the verse and help her make that point: no matter what you know about right or wrong or good or evil, ultimately there is a point where you don't know. In the mondo we try to do is clarify those types of positions and experiences.

### **Form**

In monasteries everyone is familiar with the same body of literature and the same dharma teachings, so you could throw out a verse and everybody would have the same context for it. Everybody would know something about the verse. We're not in that situation, so what we've decided to do is present a verse that everyone can see - we either write the verse on a chalkboard or hand out copies of the text. Then questioners then refer to the different phrases and words and then relate to it as they ask questions.

The person presenting the verse takes a piece of wood that represents the *shippe*, the staff that the shuso carries. He or she holds it up, recites the verse, and with the right hand holding the top of the staff, strikes the block and says, "What say you?" The striking of the block is the call for a question. The first person, the one who has prepared, begins by making gassho and calls the person's name. "Jody, here," and then asks the question. Jody is holding the staff and gives an answer.

Ordinarily we want to keep this down to two or three exchanges. We're not here to talk about the verse; we're here to meet the verse and find out what the person's relationship to it is. So if the answer strikes the mark for you, say, "Thank you for your answer." The presenter says, "May your life go well," and by striking the block calls for the next question. If the answer doesn't quite strike the mark or there's something further you want to inquire about, you can simply say, "not clear" or "explain" or ask another question. If, as the questioner, you don't end up satisfied with the response, okay, so what. "Thank you for your answer." "May your life go well." Next question. In the chief junior's ceremony, it is generally considered a passing mark to really nail one question and to hit a couple fairly well, and the rest you can kind of miss. That's still a passing grade. So we're not looking for perfection, but a pretty good relationship to the dharma teaching being presented.

This is called mondo "practice," and we do it in this way to get the whole sangha more familiar with the exercise because it takes the whole sangha to do it. When we do this I will sometimes interrupt and act as a referee and say, "Wait a minute, do you agree with what they just said?" Or someone will say, "Thank you" and I'll say, "Hold it, just a minute now." For instance, if the two people seem to be talking using different metaphors or using different language I might interrupt and try to get it back together. So that's why it's an exercise rather than the whole formal deal here.

When the questioning has concluded, the person who has presented the verse holds up the *shippe* and recites a capping verse. A capping verse summarizes their relationship to that particular teaching, and then we all make gassho and bow together.