

Accessible online Sangha meetings/events

1. Some general principles

- Removing barriers to enable people to participate in sangha activities is Bodhisattva activity - we are all interconnected, with a need to communicate with each other.
- Some of these tips are also useful for face-to-face meetings.
- People are experts in what they need as individuals to be able to participate in a Zoom call or meeting. So, **ask each person for their access requirements in advance if possible**. An individual conversation ahead of the meeting might help someone sort some access issues out. It would be a good idea to give the person an outline of how the meeting is going to run, as this might help them identify access barriers that they might face and solutions to these barriers can be found in advance.
- **Do not assume you already know** what someone needs – for example making assumptions if you have in the past met another person who may have a similar impairment or health condition. There is variation in what each person needs. We all have different ways of communicating – but some people’s methods are less well supported by society.
- **Do not assume** that someone will not face barriers to communication, because they do not have an 'obvious impairment'.
- It is not relevant what the person’s medical condition is or how long they have had their condition. **Focus on what you can do to help now in practical terms**. The best question to ask someone is *“What do you need to make this meeting/ event/ gathering... work for you?”*.
- Remember that someone’s communication requirements may change over time.
- Although people’s access barriers are individual (see above) there are some basic things that make an online meeting more accessible (see The Basics section below). Putting these things in place would be helpful, as it saves people having to ask for the basics. It can be very wearing for someone to have to keep asking time after time for the same support which may put people off asking for what they need.
- Even where there may be a wide range or even conflicting access issues, there is usually a way to resolve these situations. The wisdom of equality and discriminating wisdom (in terms of the uniqueness of each person) are not contradictory.

- Meeting people's individual access needs often makes a meeting run smoother for everyone. It helps us all to be mindful of who we are communicating with and how, the pace of our communications etc.
- For someone doing Zoom technical support this can seem a lot to take on, however it is part of our practice. And it will get easier with practice.
- Encourage feedback from people about how a meeting was for them.

2. The basics

- Run the Zoom call so that only **one person speaks at a time** - people talking over the top of each other is not good for anyone, let alone people who cannot see the screen, cannot hear well or people who may experience sensory overload. **So mute people who are not speaking.** However, if someone has difficulty taking themselves off mute (e.g. some people using screen readers) do not mute that person. This might mean that you need to mute people individually, rather than using the 'Mute All' function.
- Remember that not everyone may be able to use all the Zoom functions e.g, raising a hand, going on mute especially if they are using assistive technology. It is good to foster a practice where we all look out for each other, but the technical person has a specific role in this as well as the person facilitating the meeting.
- Consider what settings to deploy for **participants entering the meeting** which will make it easiest for people to join the meeting— e.g. the setting for participants' videos being automatically switched on, on entry to the meeting and, if necessary, not muting people automatically on entry to the meeting.
- How to use the **Chat facility**. This might depend on who is in the meeting. However, it is good etiquette not to have lots of chat messages running at the same time that people are talking. This is particularly important for people who use speech screen readers, as the screen reader may attempt to read the chat out loud at the same time as speakers are talking, so the speech will be impossible to understand. Also, blind people who are not using screen reading software might miss out on the chat messages, as they will not have access to the chat facility. It is also important for Deaf participants using a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter, as the interpreter will not be able to interpret the chat and speech at the same time. It can also help people who struggle to process more than one means of communication at once. However, Chat can be useful for people who are shy or anxious and want to raise a question or who need to raise an issue with how the meeting is going...so

- Consider using settings where chat messages can be sent **only to the hosts**, so that the chat messages do not show on screen to other participants who might find the chat inaccessible or distracting. The host can then pass questions in chat messages on to only the facilitator or speaker if required. Or the host can deal with technical issues directly.
- Or there could be specific points in the meeting where participants can use the chat function, when there is no verbal input. For example, creating a 2 minutes space for people to write any comments in the chat. Then the host or facilitator can read the chat messages out loud, so that people who do not have access to chat can hear the messages.
- It can be difficult for people using speech screen readers to access the Chat facility to type messages, as well as being difficult to read them. If the person using a screen reader has another device they can use simultaneously, consider giving them an **email address** or **WhatsApp number** that they can contact the host in real time to ask questions, send comments etc.
- If people experience sensory overload or Zoom fatigue, it should be fine for them to switch off their video and stay on the call with **audio only**. Also, dialling in to a zoom call can reduce echo, so you could consider including the dial-in phone number on the Zoom invitation.
- Research shows that **hiding self-view** can also help with Zoom fatigue. Remember to put in enough short breaks in the meeting plan.

3. Some Zoom functions which help accessibility

- **'Pinning'** or **'spotlighting'** the videos of key people can help make the meeting more accessible. For example, pin the Host and anyone giving a talk. Video pinning is also essential if you are working with a **British Sign Language Interpreter** in a meeting, so that Deaf people can always see the interpreter. Zoom is a very good platform for working with BSL interpreters and is the preferred platform for most organisations of Deaf people.
- The **'Go slower'** reaction button can be really helpful for some disabled people – particularly Deaf people and BSL interpreters, but also anyone who needs more time to process input, for example dyslexic people or some other neurodiverse people. However, not everyone might have access to the 'Go slower' feature.

- In some Zoom accounts **automated live captioning** is an available option. This helps people who find it difficult to hear.
- There are different **access options** that individuals can use through Zoom, on their devices, for example different sound settings. It may be helpful for a technically-minded person to assist someone to set these up.

4. Additional Points for presenters/ speakers

- If **Screen sharing** then the speaker should describe/ read out everything on the shared screen, so everyone has the same information. Also, if individual people will not be able to see the screen, consider sending those people the materials that you are going to use in advance of the event. This can help people become familiar with materials. This might also be important for other disabled people, such as Deaf people using a BSL interpreter, as it is impossible to watch an interpreter and read a shared screen at the same time.
- Similarly, if you are going to **describe something visually using your video**, (for example a Yoga or movement sequence) then think ahead about how to describe the movements that you are making, so that someone who cannot see them can follow your description. This will take some thought.

5. Breakout rooms

- Accommodate disabled people's wishes to be in rooms with particular people if this helps them. This can be done either through swapping people if you are using 'automatically assign people to breakout rooms' or by manually assigning people to breakout rooms.
- Accessing breakout rooms can be difficult for people using assistive technology and for people on older devices. It is possible to set breakout rooms so that people enter the rooms automatically.
- Alternatively, it is possible to leave that person in the main Zoom room, along with others to form a small group. You can do this through manual assignment of breakout rooms. If you do not assign some people to a breakout room, then they will stay in the main room together.
- If people are working with any communication support, such as a BSL interpreter, then clearly the person providing support needs to be in the same breakout room as the person that they are supporting

- In breakout rooms it is good practice for people to introduce themselves at the start. This helps blind and partially sighted people and those who have difficulty reading as they will not be able to read people's names on the screen. It is also good practice for people to say their name before speaking if there are blind or partially sighted people in the group.
- It is also good practice to read out the messages that appear in Breakout rooms – such as messages indicating the amount of time left before returning to the Main Room.
- 'Going round in turn' can also help people participate in a small group. This is because people do not have to rely on visual clues or confidence to be able to make a point in the discussion. However, if this method is used it should always be OK for someone to say that they don't want to speak when it comes to their turn.

6. Taking it further

Consider appointing an access contact person for your group, event, retreat – or even a permanent access lead for your centre. This person would need to understand the principles and importance of accessibility for everyone. Having a single point of contact that disabled people can confidently go to, to sort out any access requirements, can be really helpful. The access contact person or lead can also take a proactive role in anticipating common access requirements.

7. Useful links

Zoom official accessibility page: <https://zoom.us/accessibility>

Zoom official accessibility FAQs: <https://zoom.us/accessibility/faq>

University of Colorado Zoom accessibility tips:

<https://www.colorado.edu/accessible-technology/resources/zoom-accessibility-best-practices>

Explore Access tips for inclusive Zoom meetings: <https://exploreaccess.org/zoom-inclusive-meetings/>

For techie people – full list of Zoom hot keys if people are not using a mouse:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/205683899-Hot-Keys-and-Keyboard-for-Zoom>

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