



# What We Talk About When We Talk About Conversational Salons: The Art and Insights of Zen'tinis (Part I)

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A few years ago, something struck me: our culture simply doesn't offer many situations that are designed to support us in authentic dialogue. Most of the time, adults interact in ways that are either accidental or transactional. Cocktail parties are about transaction according to attractiveness; business-networking events are all about the elevator pitch. We rarely walk into those kinds of gatherings without an agenda, whether it's finding a new lover or a new client. But when and where do we go to dispense with pretense and become authentic? Where do we go to get real?

It's time for another option for how we gather and what we talk about. You might say, "But I have a great yoga practice," or "My therapist always has great insights," but that isn't real dialogue, and it's not among peers. When we go to a spiritual center or a seminar, a majority of the time is allocated to listening to a teacher. Events like this still follow the traditional "sage on a stage" assumption that if you put someone behind a podium and give him a mic, people will get something out of the experience.

We may leave the lecture with an idea of the speaker's beliefs, but most of the time we don't gain the group's wisdom or insights. What's more, we often struggle to find an outlet for what the experience meant to us. Having taught in both spiritual and leadership environments, I've been amazed by the way at the end of a program some participants cluster around the stage longing to share an insight or opinion with the teacher, while others pack their things and head home. They're not talking to one another.

There are so few environments that encourage us to be genuine with each other. The best-selling "guru-preneur" books and even mainstream media reinforce that we should define and identify ourselves as a "brand" that is equal parts sexy and spiritual and, of course, 100% compelling. But even as our formal and informal continuing education urges us to convey marketing messages, our social media feeds seem to be *full* of meaning. Everyone from my accountant to the dog walker celebrates the musings of neuroscientists, artists, and agitators. Our posts are rich with sentiment and character, while our in-person identities are being dumbed down into surface expressions.

It's understandable. Although we may long for true connection, we are often terrified of each other. Social anxiety leads us to hit the bar, cling to people we already know, or just stay home posting our thoughts on Twitter. We need to rewire our interactions, and pronto.

I combined these observations with my reading about conversational salons of the Renaissance—events in which thought leaders would gather to discuss the issues of the day—on politics to philosophy to the arts. In these interactions, no one person led or "owned truth." I wanted to revive this type of adult gathering—a book club without the book, or a yoga class without the mat, where everyone contributes to the content.

I took the plunge and created Zen'tinis Conversational & Mindfulness Salons. It's driven by an intention to cultivate meaningful conversation among adults who often don't realize they are too busy for it. It is a

structured interaction experience that combines equal parts themed, mingling, facilitated dialogue and guided contemplation. Zen'tinis participants are given context for interaction, support in exploring and listening, and a moment to reflect upon and honor their own insights.

And I broke every rule doing it.

People more experienced at hosting events gave me lots of advice: "You have to charge money to get anyone to show up." I didn't. They told me I had to have a marketing promise: "What are they going to *get* out of it?" My only promise was being together. As a practiced marketer, I knew why their advice made sense. But for me, the notion of charging or having some sort of concocted guarantee didn't feel right when what I was trying to do was get people together to talk, to ask real questions, and to really learn from one another. I wanted to gamble that the desire to be together would be a strong enough reason for people to show up.

And I was right.

The first event was a smash success. Thirty-five people showed up to a middle-of-nowhere zone in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood in freezing rain on a Monday evening in February. We mingled for 15 minutes, engaged in dialogue for another 35, and ended with a meditation anchored in what each of us had felt was most resonant in the conversation. I gave this eclectic group of professionals two themes to work with: *fulfillment* and *change*. What surfaced was a resounding sense of how powerfully fulfillment supports our resilience through the rigors of navigating change. The entire event lasted an hour.

I held a second Zen'tinis salon and even more people showed up. The theme this time was different perspectives on happiness, from rock and roll to neuroscience to philosophy. The number of repeat participants affirmed my conviction that we long to simply be together even if we're not going to "get" something out of it. But what really blew me away was when the people who had been to the first event told me that the experience had changed their conversations in the intervening month—Zen'tinis focused the lens through which they viewed the world.

The impact proved to me that we're craving satisfying interaction on a deeper level. And what could possibly be more satisfying than getting together with a bunch of smart, compelling, passionate human beings and sharing our wisdom?