

Dao of Doug series Guide

Riding Public Transit: Keeping Zen



Lesson 1-Where to Stand

There seems to be an increased perception from those who miss my bus, that I am not doing my job when I do not stop. I have accumulated too many pass-up notices within a three month time frame. Once again, our mirrors only capture a small zone alongside our bus, and we may not see someone running from across the street or perpendicular to where our coach is standing.

As a passenger, just yesterday, I saw this happen several times while I was sitting in the last seat at the back of the bus. People would run from the BART station steps on the side of the bus, and I could see them running, but the operator could not see them and pulled away. This makes us look bad, but we aren't intentionally passing them up. This hasn't been easy. Especially with new riders.

Know the rule for being picked up: you must be within 4 feet of the bus zone painted on the street, and it is **best to signal the operator when the bus is one block away**, especially if I am waiting at a red light nearside to the intersection, and you are standing at a far side bus stop.

- + Stand by the 'bus stop' stencil on the red curb
- + Don't be between the shelter wall and the curb
- + Slowly move one arm up half-way and make eye contact with the operator
- + Stay 2 feet away from the curb



2. Entering the coach

Rear door boarding is an issue many of my coworkers did not agree with, but I did. Rocking down the Mission, I was able to easily keep to the schedule and reduce dwell time in the zone by clicking open all doors. The largest complaint I get at the fare-box is from riders who question what I am to do about checking the fare of those who do not pay by boarding in the rear.

I was a strong advocate for rear door boarding and it seems management acceded to this request, to the behest of the union, and nowhere does this become apparent than at a shelter stop where the shelter has become a shelter for homeless, street druggies, and drug dealers. To be sure, minimizing open rear door dwell time can prevent drama from those who do not pay. To me, the open door policy minimizes drama and confrontation, and speeds running time down the line. To others, it feels like loss of control and opening Pandora's box. This is a tough one to reconcile. So when confronting the dilemma of unclean or blocked seats at a bus shelter, I must tread carefully, and seek wise counsel about what to do. Based on calls to TMC (Transit Metro Control) on the radio, when two or more calls come in to the radio operator, action is taken.

My solution to a dirty shelter encampment would be to have my friend get other neighbors in her building, or those she sees at the bus stop, to call 3-1-1 and put in a service request to clean the shelter. There are two golden words that make a difference. All shouting, pouting, and profanity on the phone lines to our call center are not as effective as saying in a detached voice and tone, **"for health and safety."** Indeed, the Road to Happy Destiny takes many rough turns. Bus mirrors hit the shelter, wheel chairs get caught between the curb and sidewalk, and crack heads crack all the glass all the time. The shards can be resold as 'ice' to unsuspecting 'forty niners' new to the city.

Just like panning for gold, the instinctive street wary denizen can sell useless broken glass as a new wonder drug to the latest techie going down from a crystal meth or heroin binge fueled by the bounty of VC: in this era, not the VietCong, but Venture Capital. And so goes the boom and bust cycle of San Francisco. Like the helter-skelter in the life of a bus shelter, it goes up and it comes down.

Just like sitting at the dock of the bay watching the tide, the Road to Happy Destiny does have its victories and defeats.





3. Ask to use the ramp or kneeler

If you would like to see a magic trick or illusion played out day after day, look no further than a ride on 14 Mission. The secret of becoming invisible is to sit in a wheelchair, particularly in a large group. The more, the merrier. It matters not where you sit on the sidewalk in the wheelchair. Those intending are only interested in their own self-interest. The thought of waiting for others, or considering a need other than self, does not compute —We have our "blindness" on and don't notice the changing conditions around us, such as someone with special needs waiting, or approaching the bus stop, after we have arrived. In order to be helpful and of service, I need to walk that fine line in allowing those waiting to board first, to "awaken" to see the person in the wheelchair that may be behind them or to the side.



A recent spate of fights over seating in the front area of the bus has me in thought about how to clear this crunch zone before it develops. As agent Smith tells Neo, in the movie, Matrix, "Do you hear that, Neo? It is the sound of inevitability." Not unlike a train approaching in the subway tunnel, lack of available space increases a head-on collision! This crunch zone always occurs in the Inner Mission and by Van Ness and Market.

4. Special Requests

State your need - ask not what I do

I have an incredible opportunity to be a guide. Sometimes it is simpler to let those board first if the time between buses is short. If the number of those intending increases beyond four or five, with more boarding in the rear, loading the chair first is best. Those that are allowed up the front steps first usually sit down in the first two chairs, under the wheel well, and block the aisle. Others sit down in the flip up seats where the wheelchair needs to secure. Youth with ear buds on, and others with children enter through the middle door and sit in the wheelchair area, inattentive to my request to make room. This is when I find it simpler to get up and face them with hand signals to arise. Raising the flip up seats myself, before the chair lift is used, is the fastest way to get going if the person in the chair is alone and has no help, or if no passenger on board helps to raise the seats. Most of the time, we as operators don't have to get out to raise the seats because someone else offers help. Other times, help is available, but few know how to pull down and away to unlock the seats to raise them for the wheelchair. This is when I need to convey patience and cheerfulness and demonstrate how to lift the seats. I choose to believe that I am "lighting a candle" for others to see.

I am powerless of controlling other persons on my bus, but I also have a responsibility to all the others on the bus that need to get where they are going in a timely fashion. The biggest challenge I face today is to balance these needs without going over the top in anger and frustration, but also to keep the coach moving without a fall on board or a security incident. Humor can go a long way in diffusing a tense situation, but there are those who are so broken in spirit or illness that do not want help and are unable to think of anyone other than their own self. Humor, here, does not work. It is perceived as an affront.

Most riders in wheelchairs have the faculty and support they need to obtain the equipment they need to be mobile. Others are unable to walk without support, or need to arrange for a special needs transit, yet insist that muni take them back and forth, unaware of the impact they are having on the line. Others insist I call the police over any small perceived trespass, without regard for the welfare of others needing to get to their destination. Unfortunately, those with aimless purpose sometimes seem to have such a large sense of entitlement, I am aghast at how to tame this beast. I have to say as little as possible and light the candle for another time, another place. Don't feed the pigeons. It goes against my



The green courtesy light over the back doors signals when the interlock is engaged, and it's safe to tap the rear doors to leave.

- Look inside first to see if a senior or walker is getting off
- Let the operator know you need a seat before moving
- If crowded, always let the bus driver know what stop you're getting off at—this protects your claim if anything happens

Gemini nature to defer and delay a conversation about choosing where to sit, and this is a main reason why I am writing this book. I hope this message gets out to those who are regular riders, so that problems go away.

The other "Cloak of Invisibility" problem I find over seating and right of way, is the passenger with ear buds on occupying two seats with a coat or bag over another seat. The ear buds act as an invisibility: you can't talk to me because I can't hear you. I sat next to this girl who adds to drama because she takes an aisle seat, covers the window seat, and becomes unavailable for talk as the bus fills up to capacity. If someone sits down on her coat a battle of wills can ensue. ***It is always a good idea to ask before entering someone's zone of personal space, as is being alert when seats are no longer available.*** This is a problem if you can't hear us because your ear buds are on. My overcoming the fear of losing aisle space and seats for seniors has been a long and challenging journey as a transit operator in San Francisco. When you board, especially with a bike, or when others are nearby, unhook an ear bud by the fare box and keep the Zen going. Thanks!