

Brattleboro Zen Center Ethical Guidelines and Procedures

Ethical upright conduct is an essential component of Zen practice and awakening. Brattleboro Zen Center is committed to facilitating a supportive practice environment where we can come to realize that our personal awakening is intimately tied to those around us. In the course of practicing together, conflict and disagreement will inevitably arise. The health of our Sangha is not measured by the presence or absence of conflict, but rather by our collective willingness to find effective, responsible, and compassionate resolution when it arises. Each situation provides us an opportunity to manifest awakening and the practice of the Buddha way.

The Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts

In the practice of Soto Zen, the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts provide the ethical guidelines which form the basis for our relationships with others and with ourselves. Though they support the practice of awakening, when manifested in our lives they are also direct expressions of awakening itself. The Precepts are intended to facilitate and support communication, connection, compassionate action, and safety within the BZC Sangha and beyond.

THE THREE REFUGES

The Three Refuges represent the foundation and orientation of our practice.

I take refuge in Buddha. In taking refuge in Buddha, we acknowledge the Buddha-nature of all beings. Everyone is worthy of being treated with kindness and respect, whatever their role is in the sangha.

I take refuge in Dharma. In taking refuge in Dharma, we acknowledge the wisdom and compassion of the Buddhist way of life. We allow the Buddhist teachings to serve as guidelines for our behavior in all areas of our lives.

I take refuge in Sangha. In taking refuge in Sangha, we acknowledge the crucial role that community life plays in our tradition. In order for the Sangha to be a refuge for everyone, we aspire to support one another's practice through curiosity, deep listening, and appreciation of our differences. Any ethical concerns or conflicts should be fully heard and appropriately addressed.

THE THREE PURE PRECEPTS

The Three Pure Precepts represent our aspirations and intentions.

I vow to embrace and sustain right conduct. To manifest conduct – in body, speech and mind – that protects and supports life.

I vow to embrace and sustain all good. To act from the compassion and equanimity of our awakened nature. As part of our effort to live ethically, we embrace the Mahayana practices of confession, repentance, atonement, and reconciliation.

I vow to embrace and sustain all beings. To liberate all sentient beings means to manifest our awakened nature for the benefit of all.

THE TEN GRAVE PRECEPTS

The Ten Grave Precepts are how we manifest as practitioners in the world.

I vow not to kill. The intention to live compassionately and harmlessly, arising from the acknowledgment of the inherent unity of all existence. We vow not to harm, but to nourish the dignity, integrity and well-being of all forms of life, including animals, plants and the earth.

I vow not to take what is not given. This precept expresses the commitment to live from a generous heart instead of from places of fear, narrowness and contraction. We realize that covetous behavior harms the person who steals as well as the one stolen from.

I vow not to misuse sexuality. To acknowledge and honor our sexuality is a necessary component of creating an environment where conscious, mindful and compassionate relationships can be cultivated. Everyone coming to BZC has the right to the safety and respect of appropriate sexual boundaries.

I vow not to lie. Clear and truthful communication is essential for the health and well-being of Sangha interactions. We commit to cultivating awareness of our own motivations and desires and to speak truthfully out of concern for the good of all involved.

I vow not to intoxicate mind or body of self or others. Buddhist practice occurs within the context of mindfulness, a state free of intoxication. When clarity is lost, it is all too easy to break the other precepts. We commit to bringing awareness and clarity to the ways that we escape and avoid difficult or unpleasant situations and to meet reality as it is. Furthermore, we intend for BZC to be an environment that supports those who are attempting to live without intoxicants.

I vow not to slander others. False and malicious statements arise from a delusive sense of the opposition of self and others. Slander can cause pain for others and divisiveness in the community. We study our intentions to understand their roots.

I vow not to praise self at the expense of others. While rejoicing in our wholesome qualities and deeds is a time-honored Buddhist practice, praising ourselves or seeking personal gain at the expense of others arises out of a misunderstanding of our interbeing. In the event that critique of the actions of certain individuals or groups is necessary, we should pay particular attention to our motives, to the specific content of what is said, to whom it is said, and to the potential repercussions.

I vow not to be avaricious – not to withhold spiritual or material aid. For the benefit of Sangha and all beings we freely offer our material support, time, energy, and presence. It is not appropriate for anyone to use their position or their relationship to BZC for personal gain or advancement at the expense of the Sangha or any of its members.

I vow not to harbor ill will. The harboring of ill will is a poison for individuals and for the community. We commit to facing those places where we are brittle and defended. Sangha members experiencing conflicts or tensions with others or with BZC decision-making groups should attempt to resolve them in a spirit of honesty, humility, and loving-kindness.

I vow not to disparage the Three Treasures. Awakening informs our practice and our community life, practice informs our community life and our awakening, and community life informs our awakening and our practice. We honor Buddha, study Dharma and nurture Sangha and take care not to diminish them.

Ethical Standards

While the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts are the foundation of our vows, BZC's Ethical Standards exist to further clarify our commitment to ethical deportment.

NONDISCRIMINATION

Any disrespectful, discriminatory, or preferential treatment of others on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, age, disability, income, political views, religion, ethnicity, or national origin is a violation of the Brattleboro Zen Center ethical guidelines.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Spiritual direction is a central part of our practice. Matters discussed in individual practice discussions between a BZC teacher and student are kept in confidence by the teacher except as may be required by law. Students are encouraged not to engage in idle talk about matters discussed in teacher-student meetings.

In rare circumstances, it may be necessary for a teacher to consult a professional for legal or psychological expertise and to disclose confidential information in the context of such a consultation. Such consultations are also kept in confidence and are only undertaken in the interest of the Sangha and the student. Additionally, teachers may consult with other teachers to receive clarifying guidance about how to work with a particular student. All such conversations will be kept in strict confidence between the teachers.

RELATIONSHIPS AND INTIMACY MUST BE APPROPRIATE

Everyone who comes to Brattleboro Zen Center has the right to be free from sexual harassment. Sexual harassment may consist of unwelcome or offensive sexual

advances, verbally or physically. Continued expression of sexual interest after being informed that such interest is unwelcome is sexual harassment.

Teachers, priests, members of the BZC Board of Directors and BZC officers, temple officers, and anyone else involved in an instructional or leadership position (a Sangha Leader) has particular responsibility toward others, especially with regard to romantic or sexual relationships within the Sangha. Particular care must be taken with newcomers. As the foundation of a practice is formed in the first weeks and months, it can be seriously undermined or distorted through the lens of a romantic relationship. Because this area is so sensitive, Sangha Leaders should allow a new practitioner time to develop their practice before initiating such a relationship within the Sangha.

If the people involved in a romantic or sexual relationship are in a teacher-student relationship, a choice must be made between pursuing the personal relationship and continuing the teacher-student relationship. Any teacher is required to inform the Board of any romantic or sexual relationship with any Sangha member at the earliest opportunity and to be receptive to any concerns raised about the appropriateness of the relationship.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No Board member shall derive any personal economic profit or gain, either directly or indirectly, by reason of their office. Each Director shall disclose to the Board any financial interest that they may have in a matter pending before the Board and shall refrain from participating in any decision regarding such matter unless the Board – acting without the participation of the Director in question – determines that the Director's interest is sufficiently minimal that their participation would not constitute a conflict of interest. The assets of BZC shall be used only to advance the purposes of BZC. No income of the Center shall be used to the advantage of any individual other than as reasonable compensation for services rendered. See separate [Conflict of Interest Policy](#).

Basic Guidelines for Resolving Conflicts and Disagreements

Practicing the precepts is fundamental to maintaining the bonds of mutual trust and deep intimacy that make our practice together possible. Although rare, the expressed belief by any Sangha member that a serious failure to observe the precepts has occurred in the course of Sangha practice (whether manifest or only perceived) can create great stress for the Sangha members involved, and result in debilitating disharmony within the Sangha as a whole.

As our practice is our heartfelt response to suffering, turning away from suffering through silence, rationalization, assigning blame, minimizing, feeling self-deprecating guilt, or not attending seriously to its causes and conditions are all steps directed away from the Buddhist path itself. Avoidance often acts as a condition for additional suffering.

Accordingly, when a conflict, grievance, dissonance, or violation of the precepts arises in an interpersonal relationship, it is essential to attend to it fully. Personally, this involves waking up to our own contribution, studying our reactions, emotions, and attachments. Interpersonally, this involves taking the time to discuss the conflict with the other parties involved in an attempt to clarify the actual causes, conditions, feelings, and responses that come together in the situation.

What follows are guidelines for resolving conflicts and transgressions within our Sangha. We intend them to assist in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation with oneself and with others.

INFORMAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is a normal, inescapable part of human life. It has the potential to provide a transformative place of practice for self-understanding and communal evolution. Peace, resilience and reconciliation most often arise through deep and settled listening and open, sincere expression in the context of heartfelt commitment to collective liberation.

A Sangha member who is in conflict with another or feels that another Sangha member or a Sangha leader has acted inappropriately is encouraged to discuss the situation directly with the other person involved. Both individuals are asked to listen and speak with the precepts in heart and mind. [Guidelines for approaching such a situation are available.](#)

A Sangha member who feels unable to discuss the situation directly with the other person is encouraged to speak to a teacher or Sangha Harmony Ally unconnected to the dispute. The Sangha Harmony Allies are Sangha members, invited by the Board to serve the Sangha in situations of conflict and questionable ethical behavior. Tenure is for one year and may be renewed. Their role is not necessarily to resolve conflicts, but to listen and guide someone through their process, empower that person with agency, and to moderate peer conversations if necessary, while striving to maintain impartiality, fairness, and true communication throughout the process. Sangha Harmony Allies will maintain confidentiality except a) to seek advice from other Sangha Harmony Allies or a Guiding Teacher, or b) to report legal or urgent ethical breaches, such as violations by Sangha leaders of the Ethical Standards.

It may be mutually agreed that a face-to-face between the parties in conflict would be of benefit. The teacher or Sangha Harmony Ally would help facilitate and witness. If an Ally's presence is requested they may serve as silent witnesses or mediators, helping to ensure that each person has an uninterrupted opportunity to speak. The parties may agree to involve a mutually agreeable third party, for example a neutral acquaintance, or someone who is a trained mediator.

FORMAL GRIEVANCE PROCESS

A Formal Grievance Process will be utilized when a Sangha Leader is reported to have violated the Ethical Standards or have acted in a manner that may give rise to legal

liability for BZC, or as a last resort in other circumstances when all other avenues to resolving a dispute have either been exhausted or are not appropriate. It exists to address situations that threaten the Sangha's integrity or create legal liability for BZC, such as an action or pattern of behavior that breaks the precepts and thus disrupts the community's harmony, endangers its members, or goes against BZC's mission and values.

The Formal Grievance Process aims to foster a culture where justice is realized, not through the assignation of blame and infliction of retribution, but by truly seeing the extent of another's suffering and understanding the dependently co-arisen nature of that suffering.

Any Sangha member who becomes aware of a violation of the Ethical Standards by a Sangha Leader or of any action by a Sangha Leader that may create legal liability for BZC must report the activity to the Board through the Formal Grievance Process.

The Grievance Process is initiated by submitting a letter of concern to a member of the BZC Board. The letter should include:

- A clear statement requesting a formal grievance process
- The name of the Sangha member requesting the formal grievance process and all others who are involved.
- A description of the alleged ethical violation (a description of the grievance) clear enough to allow the Board to decide whether the matter is appropriate for a formal hearing process.
- A description of prior attempts to resolve the matter.
- A statement of the resolution sought.

The written grievance will be distributed to all members of the Board. If the nature of the alleged ethical violation is severe or has potential legal implications, it falls to the Board to address. These include, for example: misappropriation of temple funds or a Sangha Leader's gross and harmful incompetence in leadership or teaching, abusive behavior, harassment, inappropriate sexual conduct, discrimination, conflict of interest, misuse of BZC assets, illegal misconduct, or anything that a therapist or minister would be mandated by law to report, such as suspected abuse or neglect of a child, an elder or a disabled person.

If the nature of the alleged ethical violation is an interpersonal dispute that the parties have not been able to resolve informally, the Board may elect to form an Ethics Committee to handle the resolution of the conflict. The Ethics Committee will be made up of two Sangha Harmony Allies and one other Sangha Member who can be expected to be impartial to the conflict, and/or outside help in the form of mediation from a Restorative Justice Facilitator. Investigation and resolution of Ethical violations that involve a Sangha Leader's alleged breach of the Ethical Standards or that may give rise to legal liability for BZC may not be delegated by the Board. Following receipt of a written grievance, the Board may engage legal counsel for advice and assistance in connection with the Formal Grievance process and/or may report the violation to any responsible legal authorities.

The responsible body (the Ethics Committee or the Board) will, unless it is impractical or, on the advice of counsel, inadvisable, interview the complainant and person(s) charged with the ethical violation, as well as other persons who may be able to provide information regarding the matter. Once all information has been gathered, they will review and discuss their findings, checking with both parties as necessary to make sure they feel their side is being adequately heard and addressed in the process, in an attempt to reach consensus on a response that works towards healing and protects the integrity of the Sangha. This decision will be issued in writing within a month of receiving the written complaint, if reasonably possible, and will include a follow-up plan for all parties.

The responsible body will consider responses made or questions posed by Sangha members in reaction to a final report and will modify its decision and recommendations as it deems appropriate.

Examples of outcomes include: a finding of no violation, suggesting a mediated resolution, a limited finding acknowledging some breach and forwarding this to an appropriate second party, a reversal of an administrative decision or action, a private and mediated apology, a private reprimand, follow-up meetings with affected parties, a public apology, removal from a leadership role at BZC, temporary suspension from BZC pending a change in behavior, or any other action that addresses the issue, and lies within the ethical and legal authority of BZC. The body dealing with a violation (the Ethics Committee or Board) is also authorized to decide which, if any, of their findings need to be made known to the wider sangha.

Anyone may appeal a decision made by the Ethics Committee to the Board of Directors. However, the Board of Directors is expected to work from an assumption that the Ethics Committee has acted in good faith and with due diligence, and should not lightly overturn the findings of the Ethics Committee. This right of appeal does not apply when the Board of Directors has already been involved in the decision making process.

NOTES

The BZC Ethical Guidelines and Procedures were adopted by the BZC Board of Directors on September 9, 2023. Most of the material was adapted from other Sanghas in the Suzuki Roshi lineage: San Francisco Zen Center, Houston Zen Center, Brooklyn Zen Center, Everyday Zen Foundation, Mountain Rain Zen Center, Ancient Dragon Zen Gate.

May our efforts of upright, compassionate conduct promote awakening and the cessation of suffering throughout our Sangha and the world.