

RESTORATION AND REPAIR

The MRO Ethics Committee (EC) offers the following guidance to encourage sangha members to engage in intentional face-to-face dialogue when conflict arises. This offering is a process of intentional listening and speaking geared toward the restoration of relational harmony and the repair of injury within the sangha.

These guidelines are grounded in the Buddhist Precepts, in our experience of sangha as capable of profound trust, tenderness, fearlessness and wisdom, and in our understanding that power and bias can make relationships uneven and unsafe. They are based on our vow of mutual liberation and on racial and gender equity as expressed in the Ten BFOD Values of Trust, Equity, Courage, Accountability, Humility, Reverence, Generosity, Whole-Person Framework, Cultural Fluency, and Authenticity.

This document has been adapted for use in the MRO, based on working documents developed by the San Francisco Zen Center and Brooklyn Zen Center. We gratefully acknowledge the use of these and other sources, which have informed the development of these guidelines. We consider this a work in progress and would value your feedback for improvement.

FOUNDATIONS FOR DIALOGUE

Creating a Brave Space

We are each located differently in our identities, traumas, and histories. Speaking and listening with an undefended heart may feel unsafe or uncomfortable, and thus requires courage. For this reason it can be useful to invoke the intention to create a “brave” rather than a “safe” space, since a feeling of safety may not be possible. A brave space invites us to take emotional risks in relationship with ourselves and others. A brave space also encourages us to examine the difference between “safety” and “comfort” within our own experience, as it is possible, at times, to feel uncomfortable while still being safe. (For further exploration of this topic, see “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces” in the reference section.)

Awareness of Power Differentials

In sangha we are each embedded in the dynamics of power and privilege, which exist within the hierarchy of our spiritual community as well as those of the larger society. For example, within the MRO structure a monastic holds a different position of power – and therefore a different level of accountability -- as compared to a lay practitioner. A new resident is located differently in power and accountability than a long-time sangha member. In the larger social context, we also hold more or less power, depending on our racial, gender, and other identities. To acknowledge these realities for oneself and others may sometimes be uncomfortable. However it is important to do so because it can open up greater space for understanding, and inform our dialogue in ways that are

useful and consistent with our shared practice. We are all responsible for our actions. And, at the same time, our accountability within the restore and repair process will depend on our various roles and positions.

Understanding Intent Vs. Impact

Please understand the difference between intent and impact and take responsibility for your impact. Regardless of intention, we are responsible for the impact our actions and words have on others. Even if we do not mean to do harm we may cause it. In our sangha, informed by the Precepts and the Ten Values, we seek to listen, learn, and be accountable for our effect on one another. Denying effect by focusing on intent can be hurtful because it undervalues the other's experience and centers our rationales, rather than centering the person who has been harmed. This understanding is crucial when someone experiences our behaviors as harmful in a racialized or gendered way.

Relating over Winning

The purpose of these conversations is to bring greater interpersonal honesty, understanding, accountability and harmony. This premise encourages valuing our relationships above holding any fixed position, proving a point, winning a debate, or being right.

COMMUNICATION PRACTICE GUIDELINES

If you wish to initiate a conversation to repair and restore your relationship with a sangha member:

- Reflect on the potential benefits of having a conversation to address the issue or concern. Just as importantly, acknowledge any hesitancy or fears that may arise at the thought of dialogue.
- Try to enter the other person's perspective, and notice without judgment any resistance to doing so.
- Reflect on your own part in the conflict.
- Consider checking in with a trusted third party (e.g. a friend, senior or teacher) who can serve as a confidential sounding board and provide compassionate feedback, support or guidance to you.
- Request a conversation with the sangha member with whom you've had a breach and invite them to engage you with the guidance provided in this document. It's often helpful to frame your intention in terms of a shared value or aspiration, for example, "Could we meet to talk about _____ so we can continue our work together better?"
- Set a day, time and place, and decide if you would like a neutral third party to witness or facilitate.

If you receive an invitation to dialogue or an expression of concern from a sangha member:

- **Begin by considering the first four guidelines in the section above.**
- **Listen.** It is difficult being called out. It is often difficult to hear that we have caused another person pain or distress or anger. It is often difficult to hear that our words and actions may be based in privilege or identity-based supremacy. Try your best to listen without interruption to what is being offered.

If you feel resistance, defensiveness, or the urge to respond or defend, try to hold these feelings while listening to the concerns. Try to stay open.

If your reactions are interfering with your ability to listen, do your best, and when the other person has finished, ask for a few moments to settle your feelings. Ground yourself by feeling your feet on the floor or noticing your breath or the part of your body that feels most okay or neutral, and give that a moment of attention. Bring your attention to your emotions. Acknowledge them and allow them to settle. Remind yourself that you can come back and attend more to yourself at a later time.

Then let the person know that you are better able to hear them and ask them to repeat what they said.

The dialogue itself:

- Begin by intentionally creating a space of empathy and mutual regard. This can be as simple as thanking each other for being present for the dialogue, acknowledging discomfort, or just sitting quietly for a few moments before beginning. You might decide together if you'd like any other liturgy, such as offering incense or a bow.
- Share your intentions for meeting.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences and different communication styles. Avoid shaming, judging, or trying to control each other's way of expressing strong emotions. Seek to hear the underlying message and meaning, regardless of the form it takes. A powerful feeling may present in a loud voice or a whisper, with tears, or a stutter. All of these expressions are worthy of respectful attention.
- You may feel judgment or blame towards the other person involved. While this is a common response when we feel we've been hurt or wronged, the encouragement is to acknowledge and bring awareness to these feelings. Then, return to your intention to repair injuries and restore relational harmony.
- Accept the other person's narrative as something that is true for them, and strive to understand why it's true for them.
- Share your view of the situation using "I" language, owning your own perspective and experience. Describe how the situation has affected you, emotionally and/or functionally.
- As needed and as relevant, share your view of the racial/gendered/heteronormative/etc context of the situation and how this is relevant to the way the situation impacted you.

A note for those in traditionally centered or hierarchically dominant roles:

Being in a body that is cisgendered, male, white, traditionally abled, or being invested with authority within the sangha (ex., being a monastic, senior, teacher) confers a critical responsibility to acknowledge the impact of that power and the potential for bias and misuse of identity-based power. If the other person places a framework of identity or social construction around the situation, it is crucial to listen and to learn why this framework is relevant to the other person's experience of the situation.

People who are disempowered or marginalized have no obligation to educate others on the effects of bias; please accept their words as a generous offering, even if it raises discomfort or resistance for you.

- Reflect back what you have heard, checking for accuracy and completeness.
- Be encouraged to ask each other to clarify perspectives and experiences but understand that such requests are invitations that may be declined.
- At the end of the meeting, check for mutual understanding, agree on next steps, and determine if and how you will follow up with each other. Decide together if the results of your discussion will affect others, and if so, what should be communicated to them (e.g., to inform others who are aware of the conflict that it has been resolved).
- Clarify whether the conversation will otherwise remain confidential.
- If you make a good faith effort to resolve the problem, but are unable to do so, consider:
 - Taking a break in order to return to the issue at a later date.
 - Enlisting an impartial third party to mediate or facilitate another dialogue.
 - Respectfully disagreeing and moving on.
 - Raising the issue with a decision-maker (e.g., Teacher, Training Coordinator), who may be able to suggest possible resolutions
 - Bringing the concern to the attention of the Guardian Council, in the case of conflict between two residents, or to the Ethics Committee if there has been an ethical transgression.

If you are asked to witness or facilitate a dialogue:

- Bearing witness is an act of generosity and peacemaking. It requires us to set aside personal and identity-based allegiances and to listen with deep and unbiased empathy to all parties. This does not mean you must agree with everything expressed; but you must keep the importance of the relationship and the relational development of both parties at the forefront. If you feel you are unable to offer this it may be better to decline the request to witness/facilitate.
- Ask the requestor why they want your presence at the dialogue. Is it for a sense of safety, is it to offer feedback, is it to take an active facilitation role?
- Inform the other party of the role you've been asked to assume. Listen for any concerns and suggest that the dialogue begin by addressing these concerns so that you can perform your role without anyone's mistrust or anxiety.

- Consider checking in with a trusted third party (e.g. a senior student, friend, or practice advisor) who can serve as a confidential sounding board and provide guidance to you.
- If your role includes facilitation, it is important to:
 - Ensure that both parties have an opportunity to speak and be heard.
 - Check in to make sure that both parties are accurately hearing and understanding each other.
 - Intervene and possibly end the dialogue if speech has become intentionally hurtful or has crossed the line into attacks directed against the person rather than the position they are expressing.
- If you are asked to offer feedback, do so from a place of empathy for all involved, even if you are personally offended or outraged at what one party may have said to another. It is not your role to judge the character of either party, but rather to help both people to take the next step towards creating relational harmony, to the extent that the situation allows for it.
- Observe any decisions about confidentiality. The only exceptions would be:
 - If you yourself need to seek guidance to address personal hurt or reactions to the dialogue. In this case, please inform the parties that you will be doing this, and please be mindful of not engaging in gossip;
 - Or, if you feel that any disclosures warrant the attention of a teacher or governing body, the Ethics Committee serves to address any ethical issue that goes beyond the purview of the Guardian and Monastic Councils, which would otherwise seek to help resolve conflicts with residents or monastics. Issues for the EC include any abuse of power such as bullying, sexual harassment, or other allegations of inappropriate or biased behavior, any threat or fear of violence, allegations of harassment, theft, threatened destruction of property, ethnic, gendered or racialized allegations and any allegation that might have legal ramifications for the MRO. Please see the MRO Ethical Guidelines document for further details.

Reminders:

- Conflict and disagreement are inevitable parts of living and practicing with other people. Engaging in practice-based dialogue is potentially a very productive opportunity to deepen our intimacy and ease with each other.
- Communicating in conflict is a practice, and it may take time to develop skills in this area. The more you practice, the easier it will become.

Within formal training, and as we strive to practice the Dharma with sincerity and integrity, we will sometimes cause harm to each other because of our individual and societal karma and socialization. Learning how to take responsibility for our actions and to compassionately heal is essential to our path of freeing ourselves from our karmic habit patterns, and being of benefit for others. These Guidelines offer us all valuable guidance in practicing together harmoniously.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Brooklyn Zen Center *Community Agreements*:

<https://brooklynzen.org/zen-practice/community-agreements/>

San Francisco Zen Center *Communication Protocol- Working Document*:

https://sfzc6.blob.core.windows.net/assets/CommunicationProtocol_WorkingDocument-2018-06-11.pdf

“From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces” (article from *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, Stylus Publishing, 2013)

<https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/perspective-autochtone/1d-From-Safe-Spaces-to-Brave-Spaces.pdf>