

IV. CONFLICT RESOLUTION

SILENT THUNDER ORDER

Revision 120627

A. INTRODUCTION

Our aspiration is to ensure that life within the Sangha supports our Zen practice and Bodhisattva intention. The Bodhisattva path is our heartfelt response to *dukkha*, the inexorable change that is built into existence. This seemingly unsatisfactory quality of life—that what we want to change we cannot; and what we don't want to change inevitably does—leads to human suffering.

As the Great Wisdom Perfection Sutra reminds us, “given emptiness, no suffering, no end of suffering.” Natural suffering of aging, sickness and death is unavoidable, and necessary. But unnecessary, self-inflicted suffering—and especially suffering inflicted upon others—can come to an end. Cessation of suffering comes about through wholehearted dedication to the training outlined in the Eightfold Path.

The establishment of a grievance process is an attempt to translate that aspiration into communal wisdom. Furthermore, avoidance of conflict and resolution is a condition for additional suffering. In fostering inclusiveness in Sangha, it is essential that we encourage open, ongoing communication among all Sangha members. Any ethical concerns or conflicts which arise should be fully heard and addressed by Sangha leadership in an appropriate forum.

Historically the most familiar forms of conflict calling for resolution have arisen around sexual indiscretion, and financial impropriety. A third, and likely far more common (but less salacious) category of conflict receiving less attention and publicity, revolves around issues of governance and leadership. This usually manifests as a divisive debate over such issues as qualifications to teach, competition for succession, and can devolve into factional infighting, both on the Board of Directors (BOD) and behind the scenes. Campaigns of character assassination through rumor and innuendo, clandestine meetings of factions with hidden agendas, are all-too-common violations of the Precepts. This, too, is human suffering.

Grievance procedure brings transparency to these areas so that there is an open channel to resolution, and there can be no excuse for back-channel maneuvering. Along with the policy of following sunshine laws for open meetings, one streamlined grievance process is offered for all areas of potential misconduct:

1. Social Misconduct

Social misconduct is the broadest and least specific category of behavior that can disrupt harmony in the Sangha. It can range from general prickliness and criticism of others to a vindictive vendetta against an imagined slight. Such behavioral symptoms may be indicative of a social disorder.

As mentioned in Ethical Conduct Guidelines, forms of harassment can be other sexual in nature. One may also bring a grievance if someone's behavior substantially interferes with one's spiritual practice, creates an offensive environment, or intimidates in any way, especially if clearly intentional.

2. Political Misconduct

A Sangha is not a polity, and a Zen center is not a political organization. Generally, politics, whether of the academic, business, or government variety, has no place in a Sangha. We have checks and balances without forming factions.

While this area of behavior may seem to come under the purview of the Teachers—Abbess/Abbot or guiding teacher, and/or their advisory council (AAC)—the BOD, as the only legally-constituted governing body, must establish policies concerning these kinds of conflicts and be prepared to hear and reconcile any such grievance that arises. The Abbot/Abbes has no such powers from a legal perspective, and may be forced to personally bring a grievance, when all else has failed.

3. Financial Misconduct

While most Sanghas do not have the luxury of significant financial assets to arouse concern that there may be some impropriety in how they are being handled, even in small communities avarice will occasionally raise its ugly head. And while we would hope that Zen practice would tend to mitigate greed of this sort, sadly it is not always the case. Thus, we have a policy of transparency, in that the books relating to the operation of the Sangha and its assets and liabilities are open to the BOD and any member who wishes to review them. Periodic financial reports are made to the Sangha as well as to the BOD. Any Sangha member who suspects, or has evidence, that any impropriety is being committed is encouraged to petition the BOD for a hearing and review, and if necessary, bring a grievance against the alleged offender.

4. Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct is a bit more obvious; social mores and norms tend to define it more clearly than political or ideological differences. Inappropriate sexual conduct is proscribed outright, and if accompanied by a threat to one's continued involvement with the Sangha (e.g. maintaining membership, partaking in *Dokusan*, attending *Sesshin*, etc.), even more so.

The aggrieved is encouraged to bring a grievance against the perpetrator. An allegation of sexual harassment can be resolved, if possible, directly by the individuals involved; through the Abbess/Abbot and/or AAC; or through the BOD via the grievance procedure set forth below.

B. SUMMATION

Thus, when conflict, grievance, substantial dissonance, or violation of the Precepts arises in Sangha relationships, it is essential to attend to it fully. Personally, this involves waking up to our own contribution to the suffering in these situations—through understanding 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 and procedures for resolving conflicts and transgressions within the Sangha. It is our hope that such resolutions take the form of reconciliation between oneself and others. Whenever possible, disputes and disagreements should be resolved informally and directly between the people involved. There are many ways, including normal administrative and Sangha channels, that members may attempt informal resolution and reconciliation. In this document we offer some suggestions and basic guidelines for that preferred outcome.

We recognize that for certain grievances, informal resolution may not be possible. In this case we offer formal procedures, available through the Grievance Committee of the BOD, to resolve such situations. These can be used to resolve disputes concerning administrative decisions or actions, and for addressing perceived misconduct of Sangha members.