



Insight Meditation Community of Western Massachusetts

Code of Ethics

As teachers, sangha leaders and Board members at Insight Meditation Community of Western Massachusetts (IWM), we are updating our guidelines in response to some of the problems which have arisen in Buddhist sanghas regarding student-teacher relationships and abuse of power.

We teachers and sangha leaders aspire to right conduct in every aspect of our lives. In this aspiration, we have committed ourselves to maintaining the five precepts and we cannot improve upon them as guides and standards for our thoughts, words and deed. The Precepts are open to interpretation, however, so with this Ethics Agreement, we establish a clear and specific set of minimum expectations to which we should be held accountable now and in the future. We hope that publicly specifying these standards of behavior will sharpen our awareness of ethical issues, ensure the trustworthiness of the sangha, and serve to protect and perpetuate the Dharma.

We recognize that our work is founded on trust – the trust placed in us, each by our own teacher, to transmit the Dharma faithfully and the trust placed in us by our students to provide them with respectful and appropriate instruction. In this document, we concern ourselves explicitly with trust placed in us by our students, but we know full well that we cannot hope to fulfill our responsibility to transmit the Dharma if we do not endeavor to live up the Dharma’s ethical implications.

We understand that, in our capacity as Dharma teachers, we may fail our students in many ways and to vastly differing degrees. At one end of the range of severity are isolated errors and instances of neglect; it is quite possible, for example, to disappoint a student keenly by forgetting to return a telephone call. While we consider even the slightest failure unfortunate, as fallible beings we will all inevitably suffer lapses of this sort and simply have to ask to be forgiven.

The failures that concern us more, and that this Agreement is intended to address, are of greater severity – those that are demonstrably harmful to our students, either to their practice or to their general well-being, either to one individual or a group. We commit ourselves to refrain altogether from such injurious conduct, but especially from any that is intentional, repeated or protracted in duration, deceitfully concealed, exploitive of a student's trust, or any combination of the foregoing.

1st Precept

We undertake the precept to refrain from harming other beings. Specifically, as teachers and leaders, we commit to cultivation of compassion and wisdom and understanding in all of our interactions with students.

Teachers will honor the dignity of students by respecting students' values, culture, conscience, and spirituality. They will recognize the inherent imbalance of power in the student- teacher relationship and take care not to exploit it.

Teachers assume responsibility for continuing personal growth and deepening dharma practice. They should nurture self-knowledge and freedom, and cultivate insight into the influences of culture, social-historical context, race, gender, ability, sexuality, age, environmental setting, etc. Teachers should receive regular supervision from either peers or a mentor.

For teachers who are also professional psychotherapists, there can sometimes be a lack of clarity when a student requests a dharma consult with them, particularly if requested to meet with the teacher in an ongoing manner. It is up to the teacher/psychotherapist to determine with the student what the primary focus of their dyadic engagement is, and to keep that focus intact for the duration of their meeting time. If this focus shifts over time from a dharma consult into more of a psychotherapeutic process or vice versa, it is the teacher/therapist's responsibility to address this as soon as possible, and either refer the student elsewhere or mutually agree to re-contract their current relationship. While each discipline influences the other, it is the responsibility of the teacher/psychotherapist to assess and adhere to their primary consciously agreed upon role with the student and/or client. Psychotherapy clients may attend classes and or retreats given by the teacher if determined to be beneficial by both parties. If a student requests psychotherapeutic services from a teacher who is also a psychotherapist, a professional assessment must be made by the therapist as to the appropriateness of shifting into a psychotherapeutic relationship with a student. They should mutually agree upon the necessary boundaries and parameters such a professional relationship entails.

2nd Precept

We agree not to take that which does not belong to us and to respect the property of others. We agree to be honest in our dealing with money and not to misappropriate money

committed to dharma projects. We agree to offering teachings without favoritism in regard to any students' financial circumstances.

We agree to accept individual economic support (dana) from individual sangha members only when it is freely given, never making it a requirement for instruction during classes and meetings at IWM or during IWM non-residential retreats. Teachers commit to practice being aware of energy, words, or behavior that could be seen as coercive in regards to economic support, while at the same time encouraging students to develop the practice of generosity.

A different understanding of the precept is in order when a student asks a teacher to do longer and more regular dharma consultations than is the norm for occasional meetings. This is considered more of a professional contract, such as would be the case with psychotherapy, and they can 'agree' to a certain remuneration for those meetings.

3rd Precept

We agree to avoid creating harm through sexuality and to avoid sexual exploitation, sexual abuse or relationships of a sexual manner that are outside the bounds of the relationship commitments we have made to another or that involve another who has made vows to someone else.

Teachers commit to practicing being aware of their sexual energy and how it may impact other people. Teachers are expected to get their intimacy needs met through relationships outside of the sangha, not with students. Teachers will establish and maintain appropriate physical and psychological boundaries with students. They will refrain from sexualized behavior, including but not limited to manipulative or coercive behavior or language towards sangha members.

A teacher who receives sexual advances from a student is obligated to directly and unambiguously tell them that such actions are detrimental to the student's spiritual training and will not be allowed.

IWM teachers in committed relationships will honor their vows and refrain from adultery. All teachers agree not to use their teaching role to exploit their authority or position in order to assume a sexual relationship with a student.

If a teacher and a student develop a mutual attraction and are interested in establishing an intimate relationship, they should terminate their student-teacher relationship for a minimum of six months before engaging in a romantic relationship. The teacher-student relationship may need to be terminated for a longer period of time, based on the length and nature of the student-teacher relationship and any other factors of concern, to be reviewed by and discussed with a guiding teacher or the Ethics Committee. This waiting period is to allow the resolution of any potential transference issues and permit both individuals to enter the relationship on an equal footing. They must consult with the Ethics Committee or a senior teacher before proceeding.

While both partners may likely want to participate at the center, the guiding principle should be to avoid confusion and blurring in the teaching relationship and to avoid harm to either partner and to the sangha.

4th Precept

We agree to speak that which is true and useful and to refrain from gossip in our community. We agree to hold in confidence what is explicitly told to us in confidence. We agree to cultivate conscious and clear communication, and to cultivate the quality of loving-kindness and honesty as the basis of our speech.

Teachers will keep confidential all oral, electronic, and written matters arising in teacher-student meetings, unless in the case of a students' potential harm to self or other, in which case the teacher will invoke appropriate IWM or legal interventions.

Regarding confidentiality, teachers may consult with other teachers or practice leaders about the conduct of a student if they are concerned that a student's behavior or speech may be detrimental to the sangha or to the transmission of teachings to other students. Teachers may also confidentially consult with each other when they feel the need for additional perspectives in order to best serve the students' needs.

5th Precept

We undertake the precept of refraining from intoxicants that cause heedlessness or loss of awareness. We agree that there should be no use of intoxicants at the center. We agree not to abuse or misuse intoxicants at any time. We agree that if any teacher has a drug or alcohol addiction problem, it should be immediately addressed by the Ethics Community.

Grievance Procedures

◆ Notice to Sangha of Grievance Procedures

The center is obliged to make information about ethics and the grievance procedures publicly and widely available in the center, on the website, posted on the bulletin Board, and by email notification of the policy, as deemed appropriate by the IWM Board.

◆ Ethics Committee

IWM will maintain both a Core Ethics Committee, capable of assembling a Full Ethics Committee upon the filing of a grievance, and Ethics Procedures. The Core Ethics Committee will consist of a teacher (member of the Teachers Council), Board member, and practice leader. Upon the filing of a grievance, within three weeks the Core Ethics Committee will assemble a Full Ethics Committee to consider the grievance. The Full Ethics Committee will consist of the Core Ethics Committee, a non-leader sangha member, and a member of the Beloved Community Builders Committee of the Board. The non-leader sangha member and member of

the Beloved Community Builders Committee shall be chosen by a majority of the Core Ethics Committee. The Full Ethics Committee is required to meet within two weeks of its formation to address a grievance. A majority of the members of the Full Ethics Committee (hereafter “Ethics Committee”) need to be present in order to hold a meeting.

◆ **Filing a Grievance**

A student or teacher may file a grievance if that person believes that a breach of trust or harm has arisen from a teacher’s conduct. IWM Ethics Committee members will endeavor to ensure that the reporting person’s best interests and their safety are given top priority. It is essential that there be a path to effectively and safely address the grievance and work toward an acceptable resolution. It is the responsibility of the Ethics Committee to ensure that the matter is addressed appropriately and in a timely manner, and by following through with the issue to its conclusion. Depending on the specific situation, any of the following procedures may apply:

- The reporting party has the option of speaking with the teacher with whom the grievance arose, if they feel safe enough to do so, including bringing another teacher or ally with them. The reporting party is not required to do so if they do not feel it is appropriate or safe.
- The reporting party may file a grievance with the Ethics Committee by submitting a grievance to a Board member, guiding teacher, or any administrative staff of the Center. The reporting party begins the grievance process by submitting a written complaint, including details of time, place and witnesses to the claimed breach of trust or harming conduct, and a general statement of the desired resolution. The grievance process may be initiated by contacting the Center through the “Contact Us” form on the Center’s website and stating that the reporting party wishes to file an ethics grievance or complaint. If the grievance process is initiated by contact through the website or email, administrative staff must respond by providing the reporting party with a copy of these procedures and an email address to use in filing the grievance. If the teacher on the Core Ethics Committee is the one involved in the grievance, the Board will choose another teacher for the duration of the specific grievance.

◆ **Consideration of the Grievance**

During and after the grievance process, all IWM Ethics Committee members and Board members will keep confidential all information related to the grievance, except as mandated by law and except in instances where the Board determines it must relay findings and a conclusion to the community after notification has been made to the grievance parties, as described below.

The Ethics Committee will address the grievance and provide a recommendation to the Board. A majority of the members of the Ethics Committee need to be present for any meeting in which the grievance is considered. The Committee will attempt to reach a decision by consensus and present a unanimous recommendation, but if unanimity cannot be achieved, the recommendation will be decided by majority vote. The person whose conduct is of concern and the reporting party should be heard separately at first, and then may be heard together if all

parties desire and are comfortable with that arrangement. Both parties may choose to have an ally present. The Ethics Committee may also hear from other persons with relevant information or review relevant documents. All parties will have an opportunity to respond to all information, whether oral or documentary, gathered by the Committee. At its discretion, the Ethics Committee may seek non-binding advice from any other source. Emphasis should be given to holding all parties and viewpoints in a place of compassion. Additional care will be given to understanding the preferred resolution from each party directly involved.

◆ **Conclusion of the Formal Grievance Process**

After receiving a report from the Ethics Committee, The Board will then meet to determine the final resolution of the grievance. The Ethics Committee Board representative will provide the Board of Directors with recommended actions in writing. The Board will conduct a closed special session, within three weeks of the recommendation by the Ethics Committee, and may include all or some available members of the Ethics Committee. In the event that the teacher against whom the grievance was filed is on the Board, the teacher will not take part in consideration of the grievance. In the event that the Board's deliberations occurred in a session without the Ethics Committee, the Board will relay information about the decisions to the Ethics Committee.

In the event that no ethical violation is found, the Board will refer the matter to the Ethics Committee, which will determine an appropriate, compassionate and respectful course of action for informing the reporting party. The Ethics Committee will determine if and how to address the concern with the member about whom the concern was raised.

In the event that an ethical violation is found, the Board will notify all of the parties involved in the grievance of the final decision in writing. In matters of importance to the larger IWM community, the Board will also relay the findings and conclusion to the community after notification has been made to the grievance parties.

As in each of the previous sections of this process, all communication should be made with consideration for compassion and healing to the parties as well as to the larger IWM community. In communication with the IWM community, the privacy and confidentiality of all parties should be maintained unless circumstances of the grievance warrant disclosure and, in the event that such disclosure is made, continued consideration should be given to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the parties so long as such confidentiality does not jeopardize the safety and well-being of members of the IWM community or hinder the process of healing within the sangha.

Addressing Lesser Issues

In the event that a teacher becomes aware that another teacher is acting in a way which may have caused or could cause harm/distress to a student or other sangha member, but it does not rise to the level of a major ethical violation, the issue should be addressed informally. One or more teachers from the Teachers Council may ask to consult with the teacher in question and

share their views and suggestions. It can be advanced to the formal grievance process if needed.

STUDENT CODE OF ETHICS

While all of the precepts, and most of the above, applies to students, the following are specific guidelines students should keep in mind when interacting with other students and teachers:

Overall, we aim to maintain the precepts within our meditation space and at IWM events.

3rd Precept: Sexual energy at the center.

Students should be aware of keeping safe sexual and emotional boundaries with other students and with teachers—do not flirt with teachers either at the center or outside of the center.

Keep safe sexual and emotional boundaries with other students while at the center. If you want to deepen a relationship with another student, ask if they would like to get together to discuss this at a time and place outside of the center.

Power issues.

If there appears to be an issue of abuse/power between students, for example, someone's abuser coming to the center, a student should begin by approaching a teacher about it, to discuss what options may be available. If that does not alleviate the problem, the Ethics Committee can be contacted to help deal with the issue.

If other unforeseen issues arise which you need help with, and there are no readily available means of addressing them, please contact the Ethics Committee through the Board member or teacher on the Committee.

May our ethical conduct lead to the happiness and well-being of all teachers and students of the Dharma.

Thank you to all our sister sanghas for their valuable ideas in creating this document.

If you have any issues to discuss, contact Tara Mulay at 415-240-5890 or Mark Hart at 413-259-2145 if Tara is not available.