

Central Valley Zen Foundation - Ethical Guidelines

The standards and processes in this document apply to the practice places and activities associated with Central Valley Zen Foundation: Empty Nest Zendo, Modesto Valley Heartland Zen Group, Modesto Zen Buddhist Recovery Group, and Zen Center of Fresno.

In these sanghas, a Zen teacher is expected to aim to live an ethical life consistent with the vows of a Soto Zen priest. Central to this aim is the teacher's intention to provide a safe haven in which the teacher, her/his students, and anyone practicing Zen can explore what it means to live an awakened life. There are 16 Bodhisattva Precepts that inform these intentions.

The Three Refuges

- I take refuge in Buddha, the precious, luminous nature of all beings.
- I take refuge in Dharma, an ocean of wisdom and compassion.
- I take refuge in Sangha, the interdependence of all creation.

The Three Pure Precepts

- I vow to refrain from causing harm.
- I vow to do good.
- I vow to attend to the well-being of others.

The Ten Grave Precepts

- I vow to support life.
- I vow to be respectful of boundaries.
- I vow to treat others with respect and dignity.
- I vow to speak the truth as I understand it.
- I vow to aim for clarity of mind.
- I vow to speak kindly of others.
- I vow to be humble.
- I vow to be generous.
- I vow to keep my reactivity in check.
- I vow to honor the gift of my lineage with respect.

Ethos of Care

Consistent with these precepts, teachers in the Central Valley Zen Sangha are committed to an ethos of care. The essence of this ethos is that in any student/teacher relationship, care for the student's needs, practice, and well-being is primary.

Ethical Standards, Teacher Relationships and Professionalism, and Grievance Procedures

Sanghas need explicit ethical standards, guidelines, and processes in place to address difficult situations that may arise despite the best intentions. The following statements spell out our views and intentions in this area.

Teacher / Student Relationships / Appropriate Behavior

The teacher/student relationship in Zen originates with the student's request and the teacher's agreement to the relationship. It is founded on trust and respect on both sides. However, the teacher's role and authority carry an especially heavy burden of responsibility. The teacher bears primary responsibility for recognizing and avoiding situations and actions that might result in harm to the student, the community, or the teacher him or herself. Harm to the Dharma, to the Sangha, and to individuals involved results if a teacher and student become financially, sexually, or unduly emotionally involved, or if a teacher violates trust, or uses power or position for personal ends.

A teacher must be committed to conducting relationships within the sangha in the light of these principles, consistent with the ethos of care, and in accord with the Bodhisattva precepts. Again, primary responsibility for maintaining appropriate and clear boundaries rests with the teacher. A teacher must strive to respect the integrity of all sangha members, and to refrain from any sexual or inappropriate emotional or financial involvement with students. A teacher must also recognize that abuse of intoxicants is inconsistent with the her/his position of authority. Should the teacher ever feel unable to live up to these standards, he/she should seek guidance and counsel from

his/her teacher, a senior teacher in the lineage and/or a senior teacher from the broader community.

Confidentiality

Matters discussed in individual meetings with a teacher will be kept in confidence when confidentiality is requested and agreed to, except as may be required by law or to protect the student's or the sangha's safety. By the same token, students are discouraged from engaging in idle talk about matters discussed in teacher-student meetings.

There may be circumstances in which it is appropriate for a teacher to consult with his/her teacher or another senior teacher in the lineage for advice. There also may be situations in which the teacher considers it necessary to consult a professional for legal or psychological expertise. It may be essential to disclose confidential information in the course of such consultations. In general, such consultations should also be kept in confidence and only undertaken in the interest of the sangha and the student.

Use of Power and Position

There is an inevitable imbalance of power in student/teacher relationships which call for special care on the teacher's part. The teacher needs to recognize that individuals in positions of confidence or trust must exercise care not to misuse status, power, or authority to gain privileges or other considerations, or to inappropriately influence others.

If a teacher is entrusted with handling funds or assets on behalf of the sangha, he/she bears responsibility to provide accountable and transparent stewardship.

Teacher Professionalism

In addition to the ethical points above, a teacher is accountable for meeting an overall high standard of professionalism and integrity. Specifics for which a teacher should be held accountable include the following:

- Attending and showing up on time for important scheduled

sangha events and practice discussion

- Regularly participating in zazen and leading retreats, sesshins, and classes
- Regularly offering encouraging and instructive Dharma talks
- Not showing favoritism for some students over others
- Not undermining or scapegoating students
- Facilitating safe discussion within the sangha
- Respecting student/teacher relationships when students are in transition and supporting reconciliation whenever possible

If a student feels the teacher is consistently failing to meet one or more of these standards or if there are ethical concerns, he/she should first of all bring the concern to the teacher's attention to see if it can be addressed. If there is continuing concern, the student should enlist a senior student in the sangha to explore the concern further with the teacher. If the concern is not resolved, the senior students can form a committee to first approach the teacher and if still not satisfied, engage one of the teacher's peers for advice and support.

The principle here is to proceed with care, avoiding gossip and undue conflict within the sangha, while not sidestepping difficult material. If concerns remain unresolved, more formal ethics hearing procedures are available, consistent with the recommendations of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association.