

Order of Buddhist Contemplatives

Ethical Guidelines for Spiritual Counselling and Teaching Relationships

Since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, over 2500 years ago, it has been a Buddhist practice to take refuge in the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. One of the means of doing this is seeking instruction on the Dharma for help in one's daily religious training and meditation practice. When visiting a temple or meditation group of the OBC, one may ask to speak privately about one's practice with a senior monk as the need arises. In this document we refer to this form of guidance as spiritual counselling. If someone attends a temple or group regularly, they might see the same teacher for counselling each time they request it, or in a larger temple they might see a different teacher each time.

The following is an introduction to ethical principles appropriate to spiritual counselling and Dharma teaching relationships within our Order. These are based on the compassionate standard of the Buddhist Precepts and relevant rules of the OBC, which encourage a deep respect for each person as a unique expression of Buddha Nature.

If you have any questions about anything in this document, please feel free to ask for clarification.

Guiding Principles

In the OBC senior monks who are certified as Teachers of Buddhism or as Masters may offer spiritual counselling. The following guidelines are intended to help clarify the purpose and nature of a spiritual counselling relationship. Whenever the term teacher is used below, it means teachers and masters of the OBC. Whenever the term student is used, it refers to anyone, monastic or lay person, receiving spiritual counselling.

- The teacher can only point the way and is there to help the student find their own true refuge within. They can encourage and inspire the student to do the work needed to find this - to realize peace of heart and liberation from suffering. The process of training should naturally help to create independence for the student as a spiritual adult. In a healthy teaching relationship, both teacher and student accept responsibility for their own training and behaviour.
- Teachers of the OBC are expected to follow the Buddhist Precepts and teachings. It is understood that they keep to the rules of the OBC and of the temple where they reside or visit.
- OBC teachers are not trained as psychological counsellors or therapists. They are trained in spiritual counselling and bring their many years of meditation and training to the counselling. That is what enables them to hear the student's spiritual questions and respond in ways that help the student in their Buddhist practice.
- In an ongoing teaching relationship, there should be mutual respect between teacher and student and a building of trust. The teacher may sometimes have to help the student see their blind spots, or compassionately tell them that which is difficult to hear in order to help them on the path of awakening to their True Nature.
- The student should feel free, and is encouraged, to ask the teacher for clarification about aspects of the Dharma they are being taught that they may not understand.
- While it is important to always treat teachers with respect, it is not helpful to put them on a pedestal. Teachers are fallible as are all human beings, and, as all who train themselves in religion, they are continuing to do their own practice.

- Even if a student receives guidance primarily from a particular teacher, they usually learn from other teachers as well. The teaching relationship should not lead to isolation from the rest of the Sangha.

Ethical Boundaries

There are ethical boundaries, based in the Buddhist Precepts, that should be maintained between teachers and students. Monks and postulants of our Order follow a rule of celibacy and do not engage in romantic relationships.¹ The rules of the OBC also prohibit abuse of power, sexual harassment, sexual abuse of any kind, and discrimination by its members, which include monks, postulants and lay ministers.² Should anyone have ethical concerns about any member of our Order, they are encouraged to read Our Ethical Intentions and Resolving a Concern on the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives website (www.obcon.org). The following points address areas of inappropriate conduct that could possibly develop in a teaching relationship.

The teacher and student do not enter into a sexual or romantic relationship with one another.³ Neither party should indulge any behaviour that could lead to such a relationship. If the student has concerns that this may be happening, they should feel free to speak with any teacher or lay minister of the OBC about it.

A healthy spiritual counselling relationship involves confidentiality and privacy.⁴ If the teacher however feels it to be necessary, they may consult with a fellow teacher about a concern that has arisen from counselling a student. Also, a student may need to take refuge by talking about their spiritual counselling with another trusted teacher or practitioner. Teachers should not require secrecy of a student that prohibits them from taking refuge with a third party if they have concerns about any aspects of their teacher-student relationship.

The purpose of the teacher-student relationship is to help the student in their Buddhist training. If the teacher is having serious difficulties in their own spiritual training, they are strongly encouraged to take refuge in and seek help from their fellow senior monks and/or the Head of the Order. In the event that the teacher is having such difficulties they should take care not to create confusion within the teacher-student relationship.

In order to receive and benefit from Dharma teaching, the student should be willing to cultivate trust in the teacher's good heart and follow guidance offered, in addition to trusting their own heart and accepting responsibility for their own actions. If at any point, the student feels the teaching given goes against their conscience, they should feel free to speak with the teacher about this and ask for clarification - and/or speak with another teacher or with a lay minister of the Order.

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1. Please see OBC Rules: Section XI, Rules 1-3 (p. 31). The OBC rules should be available in all temples of the Order.
 2. Please see OBC Rules: Section II, Rules 9 and 11 (p. 5); Section IV, Rule 11 (pp. 13-15); Rule 12 (pp. 15-16); Rule 13 (pp. 16-18); and OBC Rules for Lay Ministers, Section XV, Rule 10 (p. 42); Rule 11 (p. 42); Rule 16 (p. 42); Rule 17 (pp.42-43); rule 19 (p. 43); and Rule 26 (p.44).
 3. Please see OBC Rules: Section II, Rule 9 (p. 5).
 4. Please see Confidentiality Statement, available in all temples of the OBC, as well as OBC Rules: Section II, Rule 8 (pp.4-5).

Please note that the rules referenced in this document were made for monks of our Order and are not rules for lay trainees. There are, however, as indicated above specific rules that lay ministers of the OBC follow.