**SYDNEY ZEN CENTRE**

**RESOLVING CONFLICTS AND GRIEVANCES**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The Sydney Zen Centre is a sangha, a group of people supporting each other in the practice of Zen Buddhism. Honouring the precepts and recognising that each person is valuable is integral to that practice. We are ourselves, and also each other, so we need to be mindful of the effect of our behaviour on others. We all have responsibilities towards each other, towards teachers and towards the sangha as a whole.

Teachers' responsibilities are acknowledged in the Diamond Sangha Teachers' Circle Ethics Agreement. They have responsibilities towards individual students, towards other teachers and towards the sangha as a whole. Positions of authority are positions of trust with authority bestowed by us as a sangha to act on behalf of us all. Such positions should be exercised mindfully and without undue influence.

In any group differences of opinion and conflicts are bound to arise. Our task is to listen and to include everyone. This requires openness and honesty, first of all with ourselves: not fanning dissensions, not shutting our eyes or "knowing the answers". There will be occasions when wrong is done to people and trust is broken. There also needs to be openness and honesty with others: we need to take the time to discuss the conflict with the individuals involved so that there is clarity on all sides about the causes, conditions, feelings and responses which may have contributed to the situation.

The purpose of this document is to outline procedures whereby conflicts, disagreements and grievances can be resolved.

1. **SANGHA RELATIONS**

Sangha members are encouraged to follow the principles outlined below in their relationships both inside and outside the sangha.

For the purpose of this document “sangha member” refers to persons who are financial members of the Sydney Zen Centre as well as those who attend and participate in Sydney Zen Centre activities.

**2.1 Dual relationships**

For the purposes of these guidelines, a dual relationship exists when a student has an additional relationship with a teacher or apprentice teacher, e.g. client/therapist or a sexual relationship. Students should avoid behaviour that could be misconstrued as indicating an exclusive or special relationship with a teacher or apprentice teacher. Since dual relationships generally involve disparities of power and authority, they are, as far as possible, to be avoided, or at least, not embarked on without serious consideration as to the best interests of all concerned.

**2.2 Sexual harassment**

Sangha members should cultivate an awareness of the effect of their behaviour on others, and refrain from persisting with unwelcome sexual advances towards others. Sexual harassment in any context is unacceptable and reprehensible especially in a community where people are bound by spiritual interdependence and trust.

**2.3 Non-discrimination, harassment and bullying**

The sangha seeks to be an inclusive and respectful community where all members feel safe and their well-being fostered. Sangha members shall treat all individuals with equal respect and sensitivity, irrespective of nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, physical ability or any other distinction.

Harassment and discriminatory behaviour that offends, humiliates or threatens another is unacceptable.

Bullying is the repeated and intentional use of words or actions used to force, threaten, [coerce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coercion), [abuse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abuse), [intimidate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intimidate), or aggressively [dominate](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/domination) another person. Bullying is unacceptable.

**2.4** **Financial policy**

The assets of the Sydney Zen Centre shall be used only to advance the purposes of the Centre, and not otherwise used for the private benefit of any person. Moreover, no income of the Centre shall be used to the advantage of any individual other than as reasonable compensation for services rendered.

**3. GUIDELINES FOR RESOLVING CONFLICTS AND DISAGREEMENTS**

Conflicts and disagreements often arise from our own psychological issues, and cannot necessarily be taken at face value. It is vital when trying to resolve conflicts to understand our own reactions and the way in which they may contribute to suffering for others.

Where possible, conflicts and disagreements should be resolved informally. There is a strong preference that both parties (the aggrieved and accused) meet to air the grievance, discuss their own perception of the issue and hopefully come to a resolution that is acceptable to both parties. This is may be best done with a mediator/facilitator from the Ethics committee present. Such a meeting can be a valuable part of building understanding and resolving ongoing conflicts. Without opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, hearsay and talking behind people's backs can develop and escalate matters. If any party is not willing to meet with a view to conciliation, they need to put their reasons to the Ethics Committee or the Board before any further action can be taken.

The following guidelines are intended to assist in reaching informal resolution in discussions between people involved in a conflict or disagreement:

1. Stating the actual: Don't make general statements. Rather, stick to the particulars of the  
   situation and the emotions experienced.
2. Being heard. Give everyone involved a chance to be fully heard. Take the time to listen to  
   each other in order to understand the other person's point of view, and to move towards  
   reconciling differences.
3. Restating what was heard: Restate briefly what the other person has said, to ensure that everyone understands correctly what was said. Each party is able to make appropriate clarifications or corrections.
4. Acknowledgment: Acknowledge how you may have contributed to the conflict, and  
   apologise for your part in the conflict or misunderstanding. This can greatly help resolution and reconciliation.
5. Facilitation: Invite one or more neutral witnesses or mediators to be present. They can provide a sense of calm and help ensure that each person is given proper space to speak.
6. Seeking advice: Seek advice from others, including Ethics Committee members or where appropriate, teachers and practice leaders, about how to resolve conflict informally.

**4. GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE: 4.1 Introduction**

Matters that cannot be resolved informally may be the subject of a formal written complaint under the SZC's grievance procedure. The grievance procedure applies to complaints made by sangha members or teachers against fellow sangha members or teachers.

Complaints should be dealt with immediately, compassionately and with honesty and openness. Where a formal complaint is lodged, the person complained of must be informed as soon as possible, and, once the matter is dealt with, both the complainant and the person complained of should be promptly informed of the result of the Ethics Committee's deliberations and recommendations.

The Ethics Committee is sub-committee of the SZC Board and is appointed at the SZC's annual general meeting. It consists of one Board member, one practice leader and at least one sangha member. If there is a conflict of interest in relation to a particular complaint for a sub-committee member they will discuss their position with the group and hand the matter over. The Ethics Committee shall be appointed for one year. A quorum shall consist of two members of the Ethics Committee.

**4.2 Complaints Handling by the Ethics Committee**

Any member of the sangha may submit a formal written complaint directly to the Ethics Committee, to the Board or to a Board member. Such complaints shall be passed to the Ethics Committee, which shall give the complainant and the person complained of the opportunity to meet with the member(s) of the committee as soon as possible. The committee may also consider additional evidence and conduct any investigations it considers necessary.

The Committee shall, after considering the evidence available and conducting any investigations, make recommendations to the Board. The committee may dismiss the complaint without further action if it determines either 1) that there is insufficient evidence of the truth of the allegations; or 2) that even if the allegations were true, no action would be deemed necessary.

On completion of its investigation, the Ethics Committee should make a report to the Board in writing, summarising its findings and making any recommendations. A copy of this report should be given to the complainant and the person(s) complained of. If they disagree with the report, they should be given the opportunity to put their points of disagreement in writing to the Board by way of appeal.

**4.3 Action by the Board**

Once the Ethics Committee has made a report and recommendations to the Board, and the complainant(s) and person(s) have been given adequate opportunity to respond, the Board must consider the recommendations and responses, if any. If the Board considers it necessary, it may choose to discuss the matter directly with the complainant(s) and the person(s) complained of. The Board should then decide what action to take.

As previous attempts to solve the grievances have failed, it becomes the Board’s responsibility to solve the grievances. The Board members are responsible to uphold the Buddhist precepts especially those falling under ahimsa (non-violence). Those enacting harm or violence in its many forms, either to individuals or the sangha as a whole, will be the focus of the Board’s intervention. The Board will endeavor to act with compassion in its intervention, and this may include firm actions to stop harmful behaviours.

This may involve the implementation of clear boundaries and limits. For example, restricting attendance at zazen, sesshin, dokusan or other SZC activities including specifying particular days attendance at the zendo is permitted or requiring the individual to stay in the dojo during zazen unless permission to leave is discussed with the teacher or leader. A review shall be conducted by members of the Board or Ethics Committee within a specified period to determine whether sanctions should be modified, continued or ceased.

If the Board finds the complaint substantiated and considers sanctions appropriate, its possible courses of action include:

1. Private reprimand
2. Public reprimand
3. Requirement of public apology
4. Suspension from office/suspension of membership/ban on attendance
5. Removal from office/cancellation of membership
6. Referral for legal action.

In the event of a recommendation that a SZC teacher be suspended or removed from office, this can only be done with the agreement of an extraordinary general meeting of the sangha.

**4.4 Consequences of non-compliance**

In the event of the sanctions not being upheld, the Ethics Committee and/or Board will determine consequences appropriate to the situation. These may range from refusing the individual the right to attend Sydney Zen Centre activities, insisting on no further contact with particular sangha members or teachers, to referral for legal action where civil rights have been breached.

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(The above guidelines and procedures are based in part on *Safe Harbor, Guidelines, Process and Resources for Ethics and Right Conduct in Buddhist Communities* published by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Berkeley, California, USA; and from the *Ethical Guidelines* adopted by the Rochester Zen Centre, USA, at the meeting of its Board of Trustees in May, 2002, revised 2012.)