

## **Why a Code of Conduct is indispensable in Buddhist communities**

In any community people come together and relationships develop. This means that a wide variety of problems will arise as a matter of fact. People will always bring their own background, their own preoccupations, their own expectations and their own limitations. And as a result mistakes will be made with minor and major consequences.

Buddhist communities are no exception to the rule. This is not the reality we like to see, but it is true enough. Although there is a lot of misinformation on the Internet, it is quite obvious that in many cases serious breaches of integrity and in some cases even criminal offences have taken place. We are talking about power abuse, financial abuse and sexual abuse. This has been true throughout history, in many countries, and in many traditions. And it is still true today.

There are also clear indications that especially within a spiritual environment there are inherent factors contributing to inappropriate behaviour. A strong hierarchy, a close community, a shared belief system, and a heartfelt commitment may all contribute to a healthy spiritual environment, but may just as well lead to unwanted situations and people being harmed.

The good news is that in Buddhism there are many teachings available that provide clear guidance for ethical conduct. We can draw inspiration from the words of the Buddha, and from the teachers in our own tradition or transmission lineage. There is no reason why we should not draw from these resources to provide clear guidelines for appropriate conduct in our communities.

Most Buddhist communities who have had problems in the past now have well developed ethical policies, codes of conduct and grievance procedures in place. But it is also possible to take a pro-active approach and see these measures as necessary building stones in providing a healthy and safe environment for Buddhist study and practice.

A Code of Conduct should provide clear guidelines to both teachers and students, both to employees and volunteers, and both to monastics and lay people. For monastic or mixed communities it may simply refer to monastic precepts and lay precepts. It should always make clear whom to turn to when inappropriate conduct is experienced. An effective Code of Conduct is a matter of good governance, grounded in the principles of fairness, accountability, responsibility and transparency.

A Code of Conduct does not have to be a book with many chapters, it does not have to be a legal masterpiece and it does not need to strive for completeness or perfection. It is more important that it is a living document resulting from a structured process of input being given by the members, staff and volunteers of your community. If you do have a long document, make sure you have a short summary. These guidelines should be clearly communicated to all participants in activities of your community and to the general public.

This is a call to action. Let us make a commitment not to be bystanders, but to always reach out to those who need our protection. Let us make sure that in our communities we allow for critical analysis, allow for basic sanity and allow for imperfection and personal doubt. Let us make an unbreakable chain of communities committed to providing care and safety. Above all, let us make sure we always take care of each other and nobody is left alone.