

# Ethics Policy

The Kwan Um School of Zen  
Asia • Americas • Europe

## Introductory Note

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Why does the Kwan Um School of Zen need an ethics policy? We already have the precepts; we have the temple rules. Why another document?

One of the most important factors affecting our spiritual practice is harmony and a good atmosphere in the sangha. From the experience of the Buddhist schools in the West, including our own, we have learned that unethical and unclear behavior of sangha members, especially prominent ones, may do a lot of harm and destroy trust and harmony within the sangha.

On the other hand, being human, all of us make mistakes, and we need to learn how to deal with them. So the ethics statement is not only a set of guidelines on how to lead an ethical life in the sangha, but also how to restore harmony when something goes wrong, and how to deal with conflicts.

This two-page document took quite a few years, countless drafts and a big effort by teachers from America, Europe and Asia to put it in its final shape. If you read it carefully, you may notice that it consists of three parts—the general ethical guidelines, based on the basic precepts; the more detailed rules for dealing with situations that create the majority of ethical problems in spiritual schools like ours; and the grievance procedure outlining how to properly address our complaints and resolve conflicts.

The ethics policy document is only a start. Now it needs to be digested by the sangha—individually and with the help of workshops, which have already been initiated in different temples of our school. We offer it, not for the sake of simply having a document, but as a support for the heart, voice and breath of the sangha.

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The Kwan Um School of Zen encourages ethical behaviors that support a safe, trustworthy environment for spiritual development. This document outlines recommended behaviors and describes a process for resolving ethical concerns.

Some of the recommended ethical behaviors arise naturally from the five precepts. Others arise from decades of experience within spiritual communities. We encourage everyone who practices within the Kwan Um School of Zen, students and teachers alike, to follow these guidelines:

1. Speak and act with care. Treat others with respect. Avoid gossip and complaining. Employ honesty and transparency in all interactions. Avoid sexual misconduct.
2. Treat everyone fairly. Let go of likes and dislikes.
3. Manage financial affairs responsibly and openly.
4. Use alcohol or other substances in a restrained way. Honor abstinence as a choice.
5. Respect the planet and the web of life upon which all beings depend.

When the entire sangha follows these guidelines,

wisdom and compassion can emerge and guide us. Failure to follow these guidelines may result in ethical misconduct and a subsequent ethical grievance.

## Ethical Responsibilities of Teachers

Teachers (Zen masters and Ji Do Poep Sas) have a unique obligation always to act in the best interests of the sangha and, in so doing, serve as models of wisdom and compassion. At the same time, the sangha can bring its wisdom and compassion to teachers, recognizing them as human beings who make mistakes.

The titles of Zen master or Ji Do Poep Sa confer both authority and responsibility. Teachers must not abuse the trust and power that come with their position. In particular, teachers should not manipulate the intimacy and vulnerability that can develop with students. Similarly, teachers must never use for personal gain the resources of a Zen center or the Kwan Um School of Zen.

Some teachers or students may work as therapists, carpenters, landlords, lawyers, physicians, or in another profession that creates a client relationship. When a teacher and student work together in a professional capacity, it creates a dual relationship. Teachers should



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be very careful about entering into such relationships, as they may conflict with the student's Zen training.

In situations where a senior dharma teacher, abbot, or other senior practitioner assumes leadership within a sangha, they accept the same ethical responsibilities as a Zen master or Ji Do Poep Sa.

### Teachers and Intimate Relationships

The recent history of Buddhism demonstrates that sexually intimate teacher-student relationships can produce great suffering for individuals and significant discord within a sangha. For this reason, the Kwan Um School of Zen does not encourage intimate teacher-student relationships.

However, some teachers and students have successfully entered into loving, long-term relationships. Therefore, no simple rule can govern such intimacy. The sangha has the right to expect that teachers entering into such relationships will act with the highest standards of care, mindfulness and transparency. Should a teacher and student wish to begin a sexually intimate relationship, three steps are required:

1. The couple should suspend the teacher-student relationship for a minimum of six months at the earliest recognition of mutual attraction and prior to any sexual contact. Prior to reentering into a teacher-student relationship, they should discuss the relationship with the regional Head Zen Master.

2. At the earliest recognition of mutual attraction and prior to any sexual contact, the teacher should discuss the relationship with another teacher and receive guidance. In this way, the second teacher can witness the relationship from the perspective of concern for the student, teacher and the entire sangha.

3. The regional Head Zen Master should be notified about the relationship at the earliest possible date.

In some circumstances, a teacher may wish to begin a relationship with a sangha member where no prior teacher-student relationship exists. The teacher should follow steps 2 and 3.

### Grievance Procedure

1. If you feel that a sangha member has violated the Kwan Um School of Zen ethical guidelines, first bring your concern directly to the individual(s) involved. If needed, and with agreement from both parties, another person can mediate the dispute.

2. If you cannot resolve your concern through direct discussion or mediation, then you may present your grievance to your center's guiding teacher, who will attempt to mediate or resolve the grievance. However, if the guiding teacher is a party to the grievance, or if one of the parties is dissatisfied with the guiding teacher's resolution, then the grievance at this point should go directly to the Regional Teachers Group, as described in step 3.

3. If one of the parties is dissatisfied with the guiding teacher's resolution, that party can ask the appropriate Regional Teacher's Group to resolve the grievance. In most cases, the Regional Teachers Group will send the grievance to a standing or specially formed ethical grievance committee. This committee may attempt to mediate the grievance or it may propose a resolution. Possible resolutions may include, but are not limited to, dismissal of the grievance, apology, amends, suspension, or expulsion. The Regional Teachers Group may ratify the resolution proposed by the committee, or send the case back for further examination.

4. Should one of the parties remain unsatisfied with the decision of the Regional Teachers Group, they can appeal to the School Zen Master. After review, the School Zen Master may ratify the Regional Teachers Group decision or ask for a reconsideration. Following reconsideration, if any, the decision of the Regional Teachers Group will be final.

The membership of a grievance committee (both standing and special) can vary by region and circumstance, at the discretion of each Regional Teachers Group. In general, both teachers and students should be represented, and it should be gender-balanced. If a grievance involves a sunim, then at least one monastic should be included on the committee. Parties to the grievance cannot be members of the grievance committee or take part in decision-making leading to resolution within the Regional Teachers Group. ♦