



Awam Principles of Conduct

October 13, 2013

General Buddhist Principles of Conduct

There are numerous principles of conduct within the Buddhist tradition. The following represent some of the most common in the Path of Individual Liberation, Path of Altruism, Path of Tantra, and Path of Great Perfection. May these principles benefit ourselves, our spiritual friends, and others. First, may we follow the basic ethical principles of our tradition:

- Do good, or at least no harm, for the benefit of all beings.
- Practice pure view or sacred outlook, regarding all as sacred.

Beyond those, may we follow the sacred vows of our tradition, including but not limited to:

- 10 Non-virtues to Avoid and the 10 Virtues to Practice
- The Bodhisattva Vow
- The 18 Bodhisattva Downfalls
- The 14 Root Downfalls of Tantra
- The 25 Branch Samayas of Tantra
- The Mother Tantra Vows
- The Vows of the Great Perfection

Because there are many gray areas of conduct, even with these as guidelines, may we also follow the Four Reliances: (1) rely on the teaching, not the teacher, (2) rely on the meaning, not the words, (3) rely on the definitive meaning, not the provisional meaning, and (4) rely on transcendent wisdom, not ordinary knowledge. In so doing, may we also follow the guidance of Padmasambhava when he said, “My view is as vast as the sky; my behavior is as fine as barley flour.”

Furthermore, each sangha member has some responsibility for confronting teachers regarding perceived unethical behavior. In Fall 1993, His Holiness the Dalai Lama met with a group of 22 Western dharma teachers from the major Buddhist traditions in Europe and America, along with several other high lamas. The following is an excerpt from the points agreed upon at the meeting:

Each student must be encouraged to take responsible measures to confront teachers with unethical aspects of their conduct. If the teacher shows no sign of reform, students should not hesitate to publicize any unethical behavior for which there is irrefutable evidence. This should be done irrespective of other beneficial aspects of his or her work and of one's spiritual commitment to that teacher. It should also be made clear in any publicity how such conduct is not in conformity with Buddhist teachings. No matter what level of spiritual

attainment a teacher has, or claims to have reached, no person can stand above ethical conduct.

Awam Tibetan Buddhist Institute Principles of Sexual Conduct

The Context

Sex is part of the human condition. We may desire sex for a variety of reasons. In Tibetan Buddhism the human realm is associated with desire, especially lust, as its principle afflictive emotion. We engage in a wide variety of sexual relationships inside and outside of marriage or other committed relationships, even while in those relationships. We are also undergoing changes in our culture, and there are differences between cultures in our multi-cultural society regarding acceptable sexual relationships. Among those changes, sexual relationships between LGBTQIA¹ community members have become more open and accepted. A wide variety of sexual relationships are accepted by some and not by others. There are also legal issues around sexual harassment.

In the West, sexual relationships between teachers and students, clergy and their congregation members, counselors and their clients, and so forth are usually prohibited because of the power-relationship and possibility of exploitation. Such exploitation has happened in all religions, including Buddhism, and not just in the West. There have been a number of high profile cases involving sexual relationships between Buddhist teachers and their students. There are undoubtedly many more. Reactions vary. Some people are open to such relationships, while others have been hurt or are otherwise opposed to them.

Because we are householders and Tibetan Buddhism historically taught the tantric practices of sexual yoga as a form of meditation, including in some cases practice with a human partner, some additional guidance is needed, especially regarding the student-teacher relationship.

Sangha Member Sexual Relationships

Sexual relationships between consenting adults are personal. Such relationships are expected to follow the general Buddhist principles listed above, including pure view and sacred outlook.

New relationships among sangha members may happen. However, pressure, exploitation, or harassment of any kind is unacceptable under any circumstances.

New relationships can also become a source of gossip. Such idle talk violates the vow to avoid such talk. Rather, sangha members are expected to show love and compassion, always and all ways. Any questions about the application of the above principles should be directed to Khenpo.

But there is a difference between having sex and sexual yoga. The latter is a form of meditation, not a form of sex. The sexual yoga practices of Tibetan Buddhism are taught for their important symbolism and effectiveness in training the mind. The union of a deity and partner represent the union of the male principle of compassion and the female principle of wisdom, enlightenment. In practice, these unions are experienced through visualization. Historically, in some cases, highly realized yogis and yoginis would also engage in these meditation practices physically. Although some lineages claim that meditation that includes actual sexual union with a partner is required to achieve enlightenment in this lifetime, we follow the Nyingma lineage

belief that physical union is *not required*. Couples who *do* wish to engage in the physical sexual yoga meditation practices of Tibetan Buddhism must have the appropriate Highest Yoga Tantra empowerment *and* meet the qualifications for a qualified practitioner *and* partner as described in the teachings, i.e., both (1) have realized the view of primordial wisdom, (2) are skilled at the practice of vital energies – channels, winds & drops, (3) have Pure View – all beings as buddhas, sounds as mantra, thoughts as wisdom of the buddha, phenomena as a buddhfield, and (4) have mastered *yab-yum yidam jnanamudra* meditation practice (Highest Yoga Tantra) and, thus, have confidence in themselves as a deity. They may seek guidance from Khenpo and/or counsel from another regarding these meditation practices.

We encourage all beings to practice pure view or sacred outlook, regarding all as sacred, including during all consensual sexual activities.

Teacher-Student Sexual Relationships

First, *sex with a teacher is never required*. Students are frequently open to misunderstanding when invited to have sex with a teacher. The student may perceive themselves as being special, beyond the intention of the teacher. The student may be perceived by others to be special creating divisiveness within the sangha. Secrecy and lying only increase the likelihood of problems in the sangha. Sexual relationships may include strong emotional attachment. As Buddhists, we seek to eliminate attachment, not increase it. When sexual relationships end, additional problems may emerge, along with feelings of hurt, betrayal, and so forth.

Second, *exploitation is unacceptable under any circumstances*. Taking advantage of a student for personal reasons breaks both the vow regarding sexual misconduct and the Bodhisattva vow of benefiting others. Even though there are examples in the stories of Tibetan Buddhism about masters who used various forms of what would otherwise be considered to be abuse in order to benefit their students, there are other skillful means available without involving exploitation, particularly behavior requiring sex with the teacher. Pressure to have sex with a teacher is never acceptable and may be illegal.

Third, *because teaching tantra does include sexual yoga meditation, this cannot be strictly prohibited*. Secrecy regarding physical sexual yoga meditation is more likely to result in misinformation than open teaching of the practices. We teach the physical practice for historical reasons and for understanding in the context of the proliferation of new age books, the Internet, and so forth, advocating great sex through sexual yogas. These are not the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. In most forms, sexual yoga meditation is taught using a *jnanamudra*, a visualized and symbolic approach to the practices. This is the preferred form of these practices in our sangha. Sexual yoga meditation using a *karmamudra*, an actual partner, includes sexual union without orgasm. However, participants must have the appropriate empowerment in Highest Yoga Tantra *and* meet the qualifications for a practitioner and partner as described in the teachings (described above). One of the goals of this meditation practice is to transcend the desire for sex. This can be like fighting fire with fire when done with a physical consort. It can easily backfire and increase the desire instead. Teaching this practice does not require actual sexual union with the teacher or anyone else. The student always has the option to say “no” to *karmamudra* meditation practice and to follow the *jnanamudra* meditation practice instead. Any request for personal *karmamudra* empowerment, instruction, or meditation practice must be initiated only by the student, never the teacher. Generally, actual sexual union should be avoided between the teacher and student.

Finally, because *behavior does not always go as expected*, Khenpo will form a Council of teachers and advanced students to hear any cases of alleged misconduct or a confession of having done so by a student or teacher, as has been done since the beginning of Buddhism in India. No party included in the allegation will participate as a member of the Council for that allegation. The Council will listen to the story, seek additional information as deemed necessary, and recommend changes and/or practices to resolve the concern, always looking to benefit all parties and the community as best that can be done. The Council will publicly explain the case to the sangha, announce their recommendations to the sangha, and be responsible for their implementation to the best of their ability. In the unlikely event that the recommendation is unsatisfactory to one or more parties involved, Khenpo or our Spiritual Director may ask for the guidance of a third party from outside of the community for assistance, such as a lama or professional counselor.

In conclusion, we ask that all members of our community recognize that we are *all* humans and this is *samsara*, and we will make mistakes of judgment or behavior from time to time. We may not always agree on what is appropriate or “best” for other parties or the community. Therefore, we ask that all members of the community follow pure view and sacred outlook, even if we disagree. “Awam” means the union of the male principle of compassion with the female principle of wisdom. May we always seek this realization. We take responsibility for our own feelings and behavior, as well as supporting others.

The Vows

The 10 Non-Virtues to Avoid and 10 Virtuous Actions to Practice

Ten non-virtuous actions to avoid

1. Killing
2. Stealing
3. Sexual abuse
4. Lying
5. Divisiveness
6. Harsh words
7. Idle talk (gossip)
8. Covetousness (envy, jealousy)
9. Harmful thoughts
10. Wrong views

Ten virtuous (helpful) actions

1. Protect life
2. Generosity (giving)
3. Honor sexual vows & respect others
4. Truth & loving speech
5. Reconcile or harmonize
6. Pleasant words
7. Meaningful talk
8. Generosity (joyous, forgiving)
9. Helpful intentions to benefit others
10. Wisdom of ultimate truth and the true nature of things

The Bodhisattva Vow

Just as all the previous Sugatas [Buddhas]
Generated the mind of enlightenment [Bodhicitta]
And accomplished all the stages
Of the Bodhisattva training,

So will I, too, for the sake of all beings,
Generate the mind of enlightenment
And accomplish all the stages
Of the Bodhisattva training.

The 18 Bodhisattva Downfalls

1. Praising yourself and denigrating others
2. Not giving wealth and dharma when requested
3. Not forgiving others who apologize
4. Abandoning the Path of Altruism
5. Taking offerings made to the Three Jewels²
6. Abandoning the Dharma
7. Disrobing or causing disrobing of monks and nuns
8. Committing the five heinous crimes³
9. Holding wrong views (or not believing in the dharma)
10. Destroying towns or other habitat
11. Teaching emptiness to the untrained
12. Discouraging others from their aspiration for full enlightenment
13. Causing someone to abandon their individual liberation vows
14. Denigrating the Path of Individual Liberation
15. Claiming realization of emptiness when not fully realized
16. Accepting something stolen from the Three Jewels
17. Showing favoritism (or attachment)
18. Giving up aspiration bodhicitta

The 14 Root Downfalls of Tantra

1. Criticizing your vajra master.
2. Transgressing teachings of the Buddha.
3. Being hostile toward your vajra brothers and sisters out of anger.
4. Forsaking love for all sentient beings.
5. Abandoning Bodhicitta for the benefit of all sentient beings. [Or illicit sexual activity.]
6. Disparaging our own or others' beliefs.

7. Revealing secrets of the tantra to those not ready to understand.
8. Abusing your own embodied being as impure.
9. Indulging doubts about naturally pure dharma.
10. When qualified, refraining from stopping others from doing harm.
11. Claiming to be realized when not. [Or not living/practicing the view or emptiness, e.g., nihilism or permanence.]
12. Deriding the practices of others [including other religions].
13. Failing to understand or keep other samayas. [Or not taking what is offered as impure.]
14. Abusing or deriding a woman, the nature of wisdom.

The 25 Branch Samayas

1. The *five to recognize* are to realize that all the fivefold conceptions (such as the five aggregates and five elements) are primordially a mandala of kayas and wisdoms (such as the five male and female buddhas respectively) and so forth. This is the samaya of the view.
2. The *five not to be rejected* are not to abandon the five poisons because they become helpers [five wisdoms] on the path, when embraced by skillful means. According to *the hidden meaning*, (1) *ignorance* is the view free from partiality and the action free from differentiating through acceptance and rejection; (2) *desire* is the great nonconceptual compassion; (3) *anger* is self-knowing wakefulness which conquers conceptual thinking; (4) *pride* is the king of the view of unity which does not “cave in”; and (5) *greed* is to not allow thoughts that cling to dualistic fixation any room within the expanse of equality. By means of the practice of realizing and growing familiar with them, they should not be rejected.
3. The *five to be undertaken* are to take life, to take what is not given, to engage in sexual misconduct, to lie, and to utter harsh words, when they are for the benefit of others. According to the hidden meaning these five are: (1) to take life is to interrupt the *pranas*, the life-force, by such means as vase breathing, or to cut the life-force of dualistic thinking by means of self-knowing wakefulness; (2) to take what is not given is to take the *shukra* of the queen or the wisdom of great bliss that is not given by anyone; (3) to engage in sexual misconduct is to practice the unchanging melting bliss by means of uniting self-knowing with the object of mahamudra; (4) to lie is to deliver sentient beings from a samsara that is a nonexistent presence; and (5) to utter harsh words is to talk without concealment or secrecy through realizing all sounds to be inexpressible.
4. The *five to accept* are to partake of the essences of red and white bodhichitta [blood and semen], excrement, urine, and human flesh [or marrow] for the purpose of purifying concepts of clean and unclean. According to the hidden meaning, this means enjoying the essences of the five aggregates by binding them to be undefiling.
5. The *five to be cultivated* are to correctly cultivate in one's stream-of-being the five *samayas* to recognize by means of the application of realizing and growing familiar with them [the five buddha families]. Hence, they are the samayas of meditation.

The Mother Tantra Vows

1. Not to show contempt for left-handed behavior [the *karmamudra* path]
2. Not to enter into sexual union with one who does not have the characteristics of a qualified consort²
3. Not to lose one's meditative perspective at the time of sexual union
4. Not to lose semen for the path of desire⁶
5. Not to abandon both types of consort (*karmamudra* and *jnanamudra*)
6. Not to abandon the wisdom consort without her reaching the conclusion⁴
7. Not to emit semen⁵ except in unusual circumstances like *abhisheka* (empowerment)
8. Not to consider as impure the samaya substance which is the fluid matter appearing from the womb of the wisdom woman

The Vows of the Great Perfection

The Vows of Great Perfection look to our ultimate nature that transcends good and bad or right and wrong, as it is. These do not “supersede” the other vows, but represent the ultimate view of the true nature of things. These may easily be misinterpreted to apply to samsara in a way that can cause unfortunate harm. This is not the intention. Rather, this is the *view* of Great Perfection.

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and asexual

² The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

³ Killing one's father, mother, or an Arhat, wounding a Buddha, causing a division in the Sangha

⁴ This is sometimes interpreted to mean the female consort reaching orgasm, and other times interpreted to mean realization of bliss-emptiness.

⁵ While this may also apply to householders, an alternative view is to maintain pure view and sacred outlook (see also #3 in the Mother Tantra Vows).