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Towards the Establishment of a Network of Independent, Autonomous Societies of Buddhists

The introduction of Buddhism to the West has brought with it some severe growing pains. Among these growing pains are abuses of power by teachers and their senior students, which have culminated in severe distress and at times the complete dissolution of what were once strong, vibrant spiritual communities. While we mourn their losses, we also are inspired to create something new which eases such growing pains and strengthens our ability to tolerate and eventually integrate the profound teachings of these great, sometimes flawed teachers.

Once these conditions are established, we believe that Buddhism will more easily take root here in the West and flourish. These conditions will cause teachers and the lineages they participate in to adapt themselves to proven approaches to governance, social justice, and community building that have been innovated over modern history in the West. As they learn how we ingest and put to use teachings that were unveiled sometimes thousands of years ago into our communities, perhaps they will be inspired to create new forms and language for teaching their profound methods for working with the mind.

But isn't the notion of lineage outmoded at this point? This is an interesting question, and one that a serious practitioner might give pause about. On the one hand, one could consider a society to be a holder of many lineages – as many as it has can maintain strong membership with interest and desire to propagate. On the other, it is possible for many members to feel like they don't need to make a commitment to any single lineage, thereby setting themselves up as cattle grazing a wide field, not deepening their view or practice at all. This would seem to necessitate further education in how valuable lineage really is, and how the purpose of the society is not to water down the teachings to their most palatable common denominator, but instead to give its members the opportunity to be exposed to many different views in an environment of relative safety and support.

Likewise, as our relationship with the teachers and their lineages improve, we may find ourselves more able to incorporate Eastern views that were previously ignored, without feeling like we are reverting to medieval approaches to human relationship. This has the potential for creating a much more civil, supportive society for collective awakening.

This handbook aims to show how a group of earnest Buddhist practitioners can create, sustain, and flourish as an independent, autonomous society.

Principles

Given our desire to balance the conservative view of maintaining a strong connection to lineage with the liberal view of creating a diverse, supportive, justice-seeking community of individuals attempting to live their lives fully within the society they were born in, it seems important to set out some core principles. These make up a covenant that all IASBs in the West would bind themselves to, thus allowing for a sort of uniformity of belief. This uniformity gives everyone the certainty and courage to speak up when conflict arises, to find another community with the same set of beliefs if they should be forced to move elsewhere, and ultimately to help newcomers understand what they're getting into from the start.

This set of principles is only a beginning. Built into it is the desire to evolve as the times evolve. To remain "in balance" at all times, walking the middle way between relative and ultimate, liberal and conservative (in terms of Buddhist doctrine), and so on, it must provide a vision both of unity and diversity. The covenant is below:

We, the members of the Network of Independent, Autonomous Societies of Buddhists, covenant to affirm and promote:

1. That all sentient beings, regardless of belief, practice, or connection to lineage, are inherently worthy and deserving of respect.
2. The knowledge of the Four Noble Truths and practice of the Noble Eightfold Path as the method for reaching freedom from the endless cycle of dissatisfaction.
3. The aspiration to learn from, and practice within, a lineage of teachers that can be traced back to the Buddha himself.
4. The freedom to choose any lineage that we believe is most compatible with our disposition, and support in finding and discerning for ourselves.
5. A consent-based governance model which represents the pinnacle of democratic process, both in our societies and in the larger world around us.
6. The embodiment of the Buddha's teachings in post-meditation, working to further the cause of compassion, wisdom, and justice wherever we may go.
7. Engagement in the continuous evolution of our processes, structures, and covenants, recognizing that as we learn and grow, so too should our values and ways of being with one another.

Beginning

To begin, earnest practitioners must come together and join in covenant. The words of the covenant may be whatever inspires all of the practitioners to band together. This is how a person decides whether they are a member of the community or not – can they wholeheartedly subscribe to the values the community aspires to? A society's covenant shouldn't conflict with the network's covenant, unless the society wishes to engage in working to evolve it through its governance process. Otherwise, it risks being asked to leave the network due to being out of alignment with its values.

The practice of covenant supports and illuminates both the principles of justice and interdependence – when a community binds itself together using strong conviction, they are more likely to stay together during times of difficulty. It is not meant to exclude, but instead to illuminate – to maintain strength of relationship in the face of adversity.

Here is an example:

We covenant to bring our whole hearts and minds to the noble pursuit of attaining liberation and helping others do the same. As a community of Buddhist practitioners, our commitment is to welcome with open arms any who are, or aspire to become, fellows on the path regardless of teacher, lineage, or belief. When conflict arises, we will listen with appreciation, speak with compassion, honor our differences, and find common ground, knowing that each of us has a spark of buddhanature which draws us to connect.

Celebrating together

Another method of binding is common activity. The society must set aside and protect a time every week where they come together in study, meditation, and fellowship. A small community might meet on Saturday mornings in a local church. A more established one might have its own building and offer multiple opportunities on Sunday to come together. What is important is that everyone have the opportunity to celebrate each other's lives, support them through heartbreak, and generally be there when needed. This is putting dharma into practice.

A sample service might look like this:

09:55 Ring the gong to gather the community
10:00 Timekeeper invites everyone to recite the following:
 * Society covenant
 * Refuge prayer
10:05 Timekeeper reads the community's joys and sorrows and
 invites everyone to recite the Karaniya Metta Sutta
10:15 Timekeeper invites everyone into a time of silent

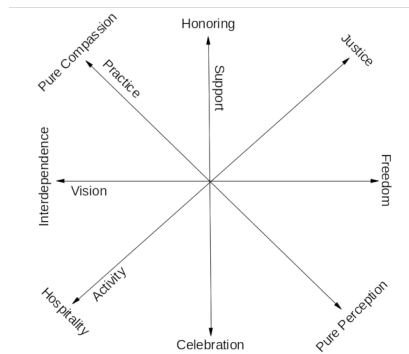


Figure 1: Wheel of Spiritual Community

contemplation and meditation

10:30 A previously-chosen community member takes the Timekeeper's place and speaks about the topic of the day

10:45 Speaker invites everyone into a time of silent contemplation and meditation

10:55 Speaker invites everyone to recite the Dedication of Merit

11:00 The service ends and the community adjourns to an hour of coffee, food, and conversation

Disorganized Thoughts That Need Grouping / Evaluation / Elucidation

- Wheel of Spiritual Community (Figure 1)
 1. Vision
 - Interdependence
 - Freedom
 2. Practice
 - Pure Compassion
 - Pure Perception
 3. Support
 - Honoring
 - Celebration
 4. Activity
 - Hospitality
 - Justice

- Never charge anyone for any kind of learning activity, especially dharma
- How does the community become self-sustaining?
 - Celebrations aligned with existing holidays (e.g. Easter, Christmas, New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, etc.) but which add a Buddhist twist
 - Celebrations of important events of the society
 - Founding Day (when the bylaws were signed)
 - Ingathering (everyone coming back from summer vacations)
 - Universal Buddhist holidays: Buddha's Birthday, Buddha's Parinirvana, etc.
 - Celebrating births together
 - Celebrating deaths together
- Accommodating families
 - Childcare
 - Aligning celebrations during the weekly service days
- Outreach
 - Mission elucidation and education
 - Distinguishing from traditional Buddhist temples, Centers, etc.
- Weekly service format
 - Liturgical calendar
- Staff
- Ministry?
 - Settled minister vs. co-ministry
 - Dealing with things like weddings, funerals, etc.
- Core governing principles
 - Egalitarianism
 - Consent
 - Bidirectional Representation
 - Questions of Buddhist doctrine
 - Self-Governance
 - Membership criteria
- Dealing with finances
 - Regular contributions from members
 - Other types of generosity
- Shared liturgies
 - Maybe a hymnal that includes songs and chants from Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions?

- Refuge
 - * <https://plumvillage.org/audio/chanting/the-three-refuge/>
- Karaniya Metta Sutta
- 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva
- Dedication of Merit
 - * <http://www.leighb.com/shantideva.htm>
 - * <https://www.drbu.edu/blog/dedication-merit>