

Ethics & Reconciliation Council [ERC] and Formal Grievance Process

Vermont Insight Meditation Center [VIMC] is a community-based center for the practice of Vipassana or Insight meditation, and for the study of Buddhist teachings and mindfulness practice in daily life. VIMC welcomes people from all cultural and religious backgrounds, including race, socio-economic class, gender, sexual identity, age, education, and physical ability. We are committed to offering the Buddha's teachings of liberation and to their application to every aspect of daily life.

As a community and as an organization, we are committed to freedom for all beings. In accordance with this, it is the intention of VIMC to provide a respectful and sheltering environment in which all sangha members and visitors may be at ease in their practice and in their exploration of the Buddha's teachings. We endeavor to create and provide a space free from the causes of physical and emotional pressures.

As our sangha members and visitors exist in the real world and are subject to the realities of human experience, we foresee that interpersonal conflict may occasionally arise within our community. Conflict may exist between students, within the student-teacher dynamic, or in a variety of other relationships within our organization. In expectation of such a situation, however rare, the VIMC Board of Directors, Guiding Teacher, and all teachers have created this policy so that all members of our community may have a pathway to successful resolution, and to a formal grievance review in the case of a more serious allegation of misconduct.

Membership and scope of the Ethics and Reconciliation Council

The function of the ERC is to serve in an advisory capacity to the Board and to members of the VIMC community in matters relating to appropriate conduct within the sangha, and to be available on an ad hoc basis to review matters of concern or grievances between sangha members.

Members of the Ethics and Reconciliation Council will be appointed by the Board; membership terms will be for three years with no limit on number of terms. The ERC will have no fewer than four members at any given time. A listing of ERC members and contact information may be found via the VIMC website, or by emailing vimcERC@gmail.com.

Initial Review [prior to a formal grievance]

In the event that a member of the VIMC community is concerned about a perceived violation of ethics or of misconduct, he or she is welcomed and encouraged to contact a member of the Ethics and Reconciliation Council. An ERC member will arrange an initial review to discuss the

concerns with the community member and to promote reflection and understanding of the concern. The objective of this initial review is to

- a. facilitate a more thorough understanding of the situation and promote discernment;
- b. offer guidance regarding possible pathways to resolution of the concern; and
- c. advance a healing discourse between the involved parties, if all parties to the conflict agree that such a dialogue would be beneficial.

This initial review will include two members of the ERC, the community member bringing forth the concern, and any other individuals who may be requested on behalf of the community member bringing forth the concern.

Additionally, if, during this initial review, it is determined by the ERC members that a separate engagement or dialogue with the community member whose conduct, real or perceived, is in question, then during that separate engagement the community member whose conduct is in question may also request participation of another community member or ally in conversations with the ERC prior to completion of the initial review.

Upon completion of this initial review, the ERC members and the community member bringing forth the concern will reach a determination regarding next steps, which will be summarized by the ERC members along with a summary of the conflict. The summary of the conflict will include a listing of attempts to resolve the conflict.

Some examples of possible next steps include:

- a. no further action is necessary; the conflict is resolved and the community member bringing forth the concern considers the resolution satisfactory;
- b. further dialogue between the parties will continue for a set period of time with the aspiration of reaching a resolution which is satisfactory to the parties;
- c. the conflict is not resolved and it is the intention of the concerned community member to request a formal grievance proceeding.
- d. other possible next steps which are agreeable to the parties.

ERC Member Selection and Conflict of Interest in the Initial Review: the community member bringing forth the concern of misconduct shall have the authority to choose one of the ERC members with whom they wish to pursue the resolution; the second ERC member will be appointed by the ERC. In the event that no specific ERC member is requested, or that the requested ERC member is unavailable, the ERC chairperson and the Board chairperson shall choose both ERC members to guide the discussion with the community member who has brought forth the concern.

In either case, the selected ERC member shall not be a party to the concern and shall be in a position of objectivity and impartiality to the concern.

Formal Grievance Procedure

For situations wherein a member of the VIMC Community wishes to initiate a formal grievance procedure to inquire more deeply into an unresolved conflict, or in a situation where a conflict is of a serious nature which is of interest to or affects the larger VIMC community, the following process has been created.

First, the community member perceiving the conflict will meet with two ERC members for an Initial Review, as discussed above.

Second, the community member perceiving the conflict or the ERC members who conducted the initial review will inform the Board chairperson and the ERC chairperson in writing of the request for a formal grievance proceeding.

Third, the grievance will be presented at a special meeting of the Board and the ERC. This will include an evaluation of the initial review summary and a discussion of the information available regarding the case and what steps, if any, were taken to resolve the conflict during and / or after the initial review.

- a. A quorum of the Board and a minimum of three members of the ERC must be present at this meeting for the presentation of the grievance.
- b. The ERC will provide the Board with recommended actions.
- c. The Board will deliberate, with the ERC or in closed session, and vote on a path forward for the grievance.
 - i. Some examples of forward paths include:
 1. dismissal of the grievance;
 2. further inquiry via an ad hoc committee.

In the event that the Board's deliberations occurred in closed session, the Board chairperson will relay all decisions to the ERC.

- d. In the event of dismissal, the ERC will determine an appropriate, compassionate, and respectful course of action for informing the community member who brought forward the concern. The ERC will also determine if and how to address the concern with the community member(s) about whom the concern was raised.

Fourth, in the event that the Board votes for further inquiry, an ad hoc committee will be created to address the concern, and the membership of this ad hoc committee will be communicated to the parties involved in the conflict.

- a. The ad hoc committee will consist of the following members:
 - i. two members of the Board (minimum),
 - ii. two members of the ERC (minimum),
 - iii. other members of the VIMC community who are not involved in the conflict but who may have specific knowledge or skills of value to the inquiry into the conflict.
- b. The committee will be approved by the Board.
- c. The ad hoc committee will determine a chairperson from within the committee's Board members or from the ERC members.

- d. the committee will present its findings and recommendations to the Board within four weeks of the Board vote to create the committee.

The ad hoc committee will proceed to meet with all parties in the grievance so that a wider and more complete understanding of the grievance may be understood. Such meetings may be held with individual parties or with all parties at one time, with emphasis given to holding all parties and viewpoints in a place of compassion. Additional care will be given to understanding the preferred resolution from each party directly involved. The ad hoc committee may request information, written or in person, from other members of the VIMC community who may have information relevant to the grievance.

Throughout any meetings with this ad hoc committee, both the person bringing forth the concern and the person whose conduct is of concern shall be able to include another community member or ally during conversations with the committee.

Conclusion of the Formal Grievance Process

The ad hoc committee chairperson will provide the committee's findings & recommendations for resolution of the grievance to the Board chairperson and the ERC chairperson. The Board will then meet to determine the final resolution of the grievance. The parties involved in the grievance will be notified by the Board of the final decision.

In matters of importance to the larger VIMC community, the Board will also relay the findings and conclusion to the community after notification has been made to the grievance parties. As in each of the previous sections of this process, all communication should be made with consideration for compassion and healing to the parties as well as to the larger VIMC community.

In communication with the VIMC community, the privacy and confidentiality of all parties should be maintained unless circumstances of the grievance warrant disclosure, and, in the event that such disclosure is made, continued consideration should be given to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the parties so long as such confidentiality does not jeopardize the safety and well-being of members of the VIMC community or hinder the process of healing within the sangha.

May all of us cultivate wisdom and compassion and recognize the interdependence of all beings everywhere.