

LBC Communities Ethos Statement February 2010

Context and history

The LBC was set up, in line with Bhante Sangharakshita's vision, to promote the practice of the Buddha's teaching through the forms of the FWBO. Part of his vision is that *practice is possible in all aspects of our lives*. Who we live with, where and how, are big issues for all of us: living alongside like-minded people who are practising in the same way as ourselves extends a uniquely precious opportunity into this intimate but nitty-gritty aspect of our lives.

The main vision of the LBC Council of Trustees in relation to communities is, firstly, that they are *vital and effective as places of practice in the context of the FWBO*; and secondly, that they are *ongoing resources* for this practice. The council has a duty of care to protect that resource into the future. In line with this vision we who live in communities acknowledge our role and responsibility to preserve their shared heritage of communal living and practice. This means, therefore, that our communities are for people practising Buddhism *within the FWBO context*, not for practitioners of other faiths, or other Buddhist traditions, or those practising personal ideologies.

Background to the ethos statement

The drafting of this ethos statement came from a collaboration between members of the LBC Council and members of the communities themselves.

FWBO Buddhists choose from a range of lifestyles. Some choose to live where they can practise alongside like-minded people - in communities. Six of the Buddhist communities in the mandala are in properties owned by the LBC, and this ethos is specifically addressed to these. It is intended that this ethos will be useful for both the Council and the communities themselves, to help us reflect on what we are already trying to achieve in our practice of living and practising together, and to give some guidance to those interested in exploring the possibility of living in an LBC community.

Practising together within a community context

This section, which comprises the majority of this document, describes some of the things that people who live in the LBC communities have chosen to highlight as important to how we live and practise together. To see them as a list of 'rules to follow' is to lose their spirit; they are intended as pointers, guidelines and reminders for living in accordance with Bhante's vision of practice in all aspects of our lives.

The centrality of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels - the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

For many of us, our personal reflections on our own Going for Refuge provide the context in which we live and practice with other people. In FWBO communities, we can not only develop our experience of the Three Jewels, but *share it directly*. Communities can be supportive places for us to deepen together our involvement and commitment to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha: we can become mitras of the FWBO, ask for ordination, become ordained, and practise as Order Members - people at all these levels of involvement live in and benefit from communities. Friendship, and the practice of spiritual friendship (aspects of the Sangha jewel which Bhante has particularly emphasised) can take on new meaning and vivid life when fed by a whole supportive context, such as community living.

Practising the five precepts together

Communities can be a great place to practice the precepts together, where vibrant discussion can lead to deeper understanding of the precepts and of ourselves. This can fuel the energy, sensitivity and openness necessary to practice them, making for personal growth and deepening commitment as we tread the path of the spiritual life together. It's important to get the balance right, recognising them as guidelines which we try to follow rather than rules to be obeyed, but also recognising that *not* following them has real effects on others and on ourselves. We are trying to cultivate skilfulness and trying to reduce unskilfulness in our lives, a process that itself takes kindness and awareness, both in ourselves and in those around us. This involves ongoing honest discussion among community members as to the real effects of what we do, on ourselves and on one another. This can lead to real, practical, mutual support in our practice of these precepts, greater ease in our communication, and in our own minds.

We may take other 'personal' precepts to help us practice in particular areas at specific times. Order Members take ten precepts, which expand on these five, showing more of the depth, range and subtlety which we can bring to our practice of the precepts, individually and together.

Positive Form	Negative Form
With deeds of loving kindness, I purify my body	I undertake to abstain from taking life
With open-handed generosity, I purify my body	I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given
With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body	I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct
With truthful communication, I purify my speech	I undertake to abstain from false speech.
With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind	I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants

Sustainable and ecological living

Just by living communally we are already reducing our negative impact on the environment. In addition to this, we are keen as LBC communities to help reduce waste, and to live sustainably and ethically, minimising the harm that we cause to our local, regional and world community. For many of us this means we shop around for the most ecological and ethical companies eg for electricity and gas supplies. We also recycle as much as we can, taking responsibility for conserving energy in our homes. Many of us source our food from local producers where possible, think about the benefits of buying organic fruit and vegetables where we can, and make compost out of our food waste. We also pool our resources to buy what we can in bulk, and pay our bills together, so that our money goes further and we can live simpler and more sustainable lives.

Practising this kind of life has, over time, grown out of our own reflections that actions have consequences, and is a conscious expression of the five precepts in this area. Each community is slightly different and the examples above reflect a range of things that communities do. Most of us who live communally are interested in discussing these issues together, and in making the best of the benefits of our communal situation where we can.

Consideration for and connection with others

We acknowledge that practising and living communally is not for everyone, but for those of us that have taken up this precious opportunity, we try to foster a sense of community-mindedness and consideration for others.

Our communities have their own community nights: one night a week the community gets together specifically to spend time with each other. Committing ourselves to doing this can be very fruitful, as it can foster much greater understanding and closeness among us. It can be a time where we reflect on our personal lives, on our spiritual practice, and on our lives together, resolving difficulties, bringing greater understanding and harmony, even playing together! We strongly encourage our fellow community members - and remind ourselves - to prioritise this time together, at least once a week.

Creating conditions for one another's practice

Many of us have created conditions within our communities that have proved strong supports to our practice. The following lists some of these, and why they have been helpful.

A shrine room or communal place for practice

Many of us have a shrine room or a place within our community where we sit together for meditation, ritual and puja. It can be a space where we honour our celebrations, as well as do the everyday work of a meditation practice, and it can hold a strong sense of our mutual purpose. We often try to meditate at a specific time together each day, to encourage each other in our practice of meditation, and to witness the efforts and changes each of us make in that practice.

Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism is practised within all our communities, and we ask visitors to refrain from eating meat there. This comes out of our practice of the first of the five precepts, and our understanding of the preciousness of life to every being. Some of us extend our application of this understanding into becoming vegan, and are interested in promoting veganism as a viable way of honouring our values in our own lives.

Single-sex communities

All of the LBC communities are currently single-sex. This has grown out of Bhante's emphasis on the importance of women and men more fully understanding and being in contact with their own individuality, with a sense of both the

masculine and the feminine aspects of their own nature. Many of us have found that living or working in single-sex situations has helped us develop deeper friendships with members of the same sex. Spending some time away from the tensions and projections that can arise in mixed-gender company can help us to recognise our own patterns, and to develop confidence in our growing individuality, whoever we may be with.

Open or closed community?

Our communities are generally either 'open' or 'closed'. 'Closed' communities are closed to members of the opposite sex; 'open' communities allow members of the opposite sex to come in, sometimes within agreed boundaries. Different communities will also have their own agreements about whether sexual partners can stay overnight. All of these variations involve dialogue, and ask for understanding from all concerned.

The community buildings owned by the LBC are all in close proximity to other communities - the four houses in Approach Road share a garden, the communities above the Centre share staircases and overlook the community across the courtyard. Decisions made by one community can therefore have a direct impact on at least some other communities. So mutual awareness and dialogue are an important part of inter-community life. In addition, the LBC council has a responsibility - shared with those who live in communities - to maintain the range of communities in line with Bhante's vision for the Movement, for example to keep available the option of living in a closed community. There are people in our mandala who choose to live in this way, and actively benefit from it; it is a rare opportunity in our society, can be easily lost, and hard to re-instate. So there's a need for a willingness to engage in dialogue (formally or informally, but sensitively and with flexibility) about any fundamental change proposed in a community; and for the communities, as well as the Council, to understand the 'stewardship' and 'mandala-wide' aspects of their situation. Whether open or closed, we encourage people who want to join a community to ask questions about this and all other aspects of how we choose to live.

Questioning our relationships with intoxicants, e.g. drugs, alcohol etc.

Many of us find the community a supportive context in which to live simpler lives, free from 'intoxicants that cloud the mind'. The fifth precept asks us to cultivate mindfulness, and to become helpfully intimate with the nature of our minds. Our communities need to be places where drug and alcohol use are strongly discouraged, because their unhelpful effects are genuinely recognised and understood as running counter to the aims of increasing clarity and kindness. Hopefully we create an atmosphere in which the use of intoxicants naturally falls away.

Moving in, and moving on

The LBC communities encompass both a rich heritage and a wide range of experience. For many of us our first experience of communal living was to go on retreat - some of us actually set up our communities as a result of the positive experiences we had on retreats together. It is important for us that we not only preserve our history and heritage but that we continue to develop, thrive and grow, both as individuals and as communities, and so we warmly welcome people who are interested in living and practising together within the context of the FWBO.

When someone decides to leave a community, a period of transition can be helpful for them in moving on; it is also crucial for the community that remains to have time to find a new community member in their place. It takes time to advertise that a space is available, and for a community to get to know someone well enough to be able to offer them the place. For this reason a standard three-month notice period is common. So when we move in to a community we recognise that we are taking on a longer than usual notice period, understanding that it is an important element in maintaining the ongoing stability of the community. It allows time for the potential new member to meet the community and consider; it allows the community to be spacious rather than anxious in relation to the potential new person, and in relation to their responsibility to fill the space and meet their financial obligations.