

**The Hong Kong Buddhist Association
Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong**

**Code of Ethics for
Professional Buddhist Counsellors**

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Code of Ethics for Professional Buddhist Counsellors

PREAMBLE

Buddhist counsellors should commit to a high level of moral standard and strive to enhance their spirituality continuously. To be in a position to provide counselling, spiritual support and guidance, Buddhist counsellors must have their own spiritual foundation based on the Three Refuges, the Five Precepts and the Bodhisattva Vows. Buddhist counsellors take the role of a ‘Skillful and Compassionate Mentor’ (kalyāṇa-mitra, 善知識)ⁱ to help clients develop a deeper comprehension of suffering, the cause of suffering, and the path that leads to the end of suffering through nourishment of right view, compassion, and wisdom.

This Ethical Code sets out the standards of conduct expected of Buddhist counsellors toward those in their care and in their daily interactions with others. This document deals with major topics of ethical standards that Buddhist counsellors should uphold. The following Guiding Principles are a framework for behaviour, attitude and decision making for Buddhist counsellors. Such principles are further spelt out as codes which provide specific guidelines and standards to cover most situations encountered by Buddhist counsellors.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND CODES

1. Related to Self

1.1. Guiding principles

- 1.1.1. Awareness
- 1.1.2. Personal Integrity guided by Buddhist teachings and values
- 1.1.3. Loving-kindness and Compassion

1.2. Codes

1.2.1. Awareness

- 1.2.1.1. Buddhist counsellors should foster and develop awareness and mindfulness in daily life.
- 1.2.1.2. Buddhist counsellors are to be aware of their own professional responsibility. They should look after their own well-being by employing the self-care regime of Buddhist practices and strive to be aware of their mental states that may deviate from being fully present with their clients.

1.2.2. Personal integrity

- 1.2.2.1. Buddhist counsellors should maintain a high ethical standard in accordance with the spirit of the Five Precepts.
- 1.2.2.2. Buddhist counsellors should accept and embody Buddhist teachings and values.

1.2.3. Loving-kindness and compassion

- 1.2.3.1. Guided by Buddhist loving-kindness and compassion to alleviate human sufferings, Buddhist counsellors should strive to enhance spirituality, mental health, and well-being in the best interest of clients.

1.2.4. Religious and spiritual affiliation

- 1.2.4.1. Buddhist counsellors should be a practicing member of a righteous and recognized Buddhist community. Buddhist counsellors should also maintain a good relationship and standing with Buddhist communities.

2. Related to Others

2.1. Guiding principles

- 2.1.1. Beneficence
- 2.1.2. Being Respectful, Empathic, and Compassionate

2.2. Codes

2.2.1. Working with clients

2.2.1.1. Respect and Dignity

- 2.2.1.1.1. Buddhist counsellors should treat and respect each client with dignity, and protect their privacy and confidentiality.
- 2.2.1.1.2. Buddhist counsellors should acknowledge and understand their clients' emotions, values, and choices.
- 2.2.1.1.3. Buddhist counsellors should respect clients' rights, cultural, ethnic, age, gender, sexual-orientation, ability, family/social/economic status, spiritual, and religious diversity.
- 2.2.1.1.4. Buddhist counsellors should have the sensitivity in the use of touch, physical contact, and other interactions.

2.2.1.2. Equity and Fairness

- 2.2.1.2.1. Buddhist counsellors should treat all clients with equity and fairness, and to take precautions to offer services without being influenced by their own prejudice.

2.2.1.3. Informed Decision

- 2.2.1.3.1. Buddhist counsellors should provide adequate information to clients about the counselling service that they will be receiving, and obtain an informed consent prior to the first counselling session.

2.2.1.4. Responsibility

- 2.2.1.4.1. Buddhist counsellors should refrain from providing services to clients when their personal factors, such as transference and counter-transference, and value conflict may impinge on the quality of service.
- 2.2.1.4.2. Buddhist counsellors should avoid as far as possible to engage in relationships and/or commitments that may lead to a conflict of interest between parties. If a conflict of interest is likely or unavoidable, Buddhist counsellors should declare and make them known to clients. They should inform clients of their right to terminate the service or to request for a transfer.
- 2.2.1.4.3. If there is a change of post or termination of service provided by the Buddhist counsellor, proper arrangements with careful considerations for the preparation of clients and the handing-over of work to another colleague should be made, so as to minimize possible adverse effects.

2.2.1.5. Confidentiality

- 2.2.1.5.1. Buddhist counsellors should respect and safeguard clients' right to privacy and confidentiality. However, they should also make known the limits of confidentiality at the beginning of the professional relationship with clients.
- 2.2.1.5.2. Buddhist counsellors are to keep confidential information freely divulged by clients unless written permission is given to share such information.
- 2.2.1.5.3. In disclosing case materials, Buddhist counsellors should make necessary and responsible efforts to remove all identifying information and to seek consent, as far as possible, from the client.

- 2.2.1.5.4. Buddhist counsellors should not discuss confidential information in any setting unless privacy can be ensured.
- 2.2.1.5.5. Buddhist counsellors should strive to be knowledgeable about the latest technology for a secure platform in record keeping, storage and retrieval. Clients' notes, records and the use of IT should be kept secure and confidential, and should conform to local privacy laws.
- 2.2.1.5.6. In the case of a request for information from other parties that such an action may reveal that clients are currently receiving Buddhist counselling services, unless in compliance with the relevant Data Protection Principles of The Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap. 486), Buddhist counsellors should obtain informed consent from clients before disseminating such information.

2.2.1.6. Counselling Relationship

- 2.2.1.6.1. Buddhist counsellors should develop a trustful and honest relationship with clients with understanding and sensitivity.
- 2.2.1.6.2. Buddhist counsellors should establish a courteous and caring therapeutic alliance with clients.
- 2.2.1.6.3. Buddhist counsellors should observe and maintain professional boundaries with clients, and avoid any conflicts of interest, and avoid engaging in multiple relationships with clients.
- 2.2.1.6.4. Buddhist counsellors should recognize and work within their competence based on their education, training, supervised experience, and relevant professional knowledge and skills. Buddhist counsellors should make appropriate referral if their clients' problems are beyond their competence, or the agency's resources or scope of service.
- 2.2.1.6.5. Buddhist counsellors should not act in ways that exploit, manipulate, or cause harm to clients.
- 2.2.1.6.6. Buddhist counsellors should not engage in any form of romantic or sexual intimacies, sexual misconduct, sexual harassment or sexual assault with clients.
- 2.2.1.6.7. Buddhist counsellors should avoid engaging in romantic or sexual intimacies with former clients after cessation or termination of counselling service.
- 2.2.1.6.8. Buddhist counsellors must not take advantage of clients for personal, financial, institutional or political purposes.

2.2.2. Working with colleagues, employers, organizations and other professionals

2.2.2.1. Work Ethics

- 2.2.2.1.1. Buddhist counsellors should be open and honest and behave in a collaborative and co-operative manner with colleagues, supervisors, the organization that they work for, and relevant parties within the limits of confidentiality to enhance professional interests, concerns, and service effectiveness. They should strive to resolve ethical dilemmas or complaints and take part in reviews and investigations. They should communicate honestly and openly with all parties concerned and seek consultation with colleagues, supervisors, organizations, and relevant parties whenever necessary and in accordance with the organization's policies.
- 2.2.2.1.2. Buddhist counsellors should ensure that service referral is with clinically appropriate resources in accordance with the organization's policies and prior consent from clients.

2.2.2.2. Declaration of Interest and Independent Practice

- 2.2.2.2.1. Buddhist counsellors should declare any conflict of interest that may compromise their impartiality or the interests of those they serve and the institutions that they work for. In case of conflict of interest or conflict of roles, Buddhist counsellors should withdraw from the professional relationship or remove the source of conflict before continuing their professional engagement.
- 2.2.2.2.2. Buddhist counsellors should not use institutional affiliation to recruit clients for private practice without the consent of the organization.
- 2.2.2.2.3. When undertaking public activities or making any public statements, Buddhist counsellors should make clear whether they are acting in a personal capacity or on behalf of a group or an organization.
- 2.2.2.2.4. Buddhist counsellors should not solicit clients of other professionals by persuading them to leave such a service, unless they believe, in good faith, that the said service will lead to disadvantage or disservice to the client.

2.2.2.3. Billing Practice

- 2.2.2.3.1. Buddhist counsellors should establish and maintain billing practices, if any, that accurately reflect the nature and extent of service provided.
- 2.2.2.3.2. Buddhist counsellors should clearly inform clients of all fee rates and charges before services are delivered.
- 2.2.2.3.3. Buddhist counsellors should consider a sliding scale or Pro Bono services for those in need.
- 2.2.2.3.4. If and when a fee for service is required, Buddhist counsellors should ensure that clients would not be denied timely services they need because of financial constraints.

3. Professionalism

3.1. Guiding principles

- 3.1.1. Continuous practice and development of spiritual formation
- 3.1.2. Competency in Buddhist knowledge and counselling skills
- 3.1.3. Maintain and adhere to the Principles and Codes of Ethics of Buddhist counsellors established by the Hong Kong Buddhist Association and the Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong.

3.2. Codes

3.2.1. Integrity

The service and behaviour of Buddhist counsellors should represent their academic and professional qualifications, experiences, affiliations, and working methodology truthfully and accurately. They should not make unjustifiable claims about their positions, roles, status, and competence.

3.2.2. Continuous learning

- 3.2.2.1. Buddhist counsellors should possess and maintain necessary knowledge, skills and methodology through appropriate education, training, consultation, and research to facilitate them to serve.
- 3.2.2.2. Buddhist counsellors should be active in enhancing their professional proficiency, particularly in spiritual formation.
- 3.2.2.3. Buddhist counsellors should endeavour to understand scientific research studies in Buddhist studies, Buddhist counselling and general counselling to acquire skillful means and techniques to ensure the best therapeutic effect safely, ethically and legally.

3.2.3. Mentoring & supervision

- 3.2.3.1. Junior Buddhist counsellors should observe and maintain professional relationship and boundaries with supervisors and to ensure supervisory judgments will not be impaired.
- 3.2.3.2. Buddhist counsellors who provide supervision should recognize a supervisor's educational, supportive, developmental, and work-focused role and should not abuse the professional relationship with supervisees for any interests.
- 3.2.3.3. Buddhist counsellors who provide supervision should monitor their supervisees to act in accordance with this Code of Ethics.
- 3.2.3.4. Buddhist counsellors who function as supervisors or educators should not be in an intimate relationship or engage in any sexual activities or sexual contacts with supervisees, students, or trainees while exercising professional authority.
- 3.2.3.5. Buddhist counsellors should provide services in substantive areas or use intervention techniques or approaches that are new to them only after being engaged in appropriate studies, training, professional consultation, and supervision by people who are competent in those interventions or techniques. When generally recognized standards do not exist with respect to an emerging area of practice, Buddhist counsellors should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps, including appropriate education, research, training, professional consultation, and supervision, to ensure the competence in their work and to protect clients from harm.
- 3.2.3.6. Buddhist counsellors should take responsibility to help those who are entering the profession to establish, strengthen and develop their ethics, values, skills, and knowledge.

4. Resolving ethical issues

4.1. Guiding principles

- 4.1.1. Safeguard Professional Standard of Buddhist Counselling
- 4.1.2. Safeguard Welfare of Clients

4.2. Codes

4.2.1. Honesty

- 4.2.1.1. Buddhist counsellors should report only those facts that are known to them personally.
- 4.2.1.2. Buddhist counsellors should be ready to defend and as far as possible should report facts known to them when being called upon to give information in defence of other Buddhist counsellors against unjust accusations.

4.2.2. Appropriate actions

- 4.2.2.1. When Buddhist counsellors come across a possible ethical violation by another Buddhist counsellor, they may attempt to resolve the issue by bringing it to the attention of that individual, if an informal resolution appears appropriate and the intervention does not violate any confidentiality rights that may be involved.
- 4.2.2.2. If an apparent ethical violation has substantially harmed or is likely to substantially harm a person or organization and is not appropriate for informal resolution, or is not resolved properly in that fashion, Buddhist counsellors should bring to the attention of appropriate bodies any violation of this Code of Ethics that may put the interests of clients at risk.

REFERENCES

1. Code of Ethics for Professional Buddhist Counsellors (PGDip students)
2. Code of Conduct, Chaplaincy Australia
3. Code of Conduct for Healthcare Chaplains, UK Board of Healthcare Chaplains
4. Common Code of Ethics for Chaplains, Pastoral Counselors, Pastoral Educators and Students, US
5. Code of Ethics, Association of Professional Chaplains, US
6. Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers, HK Social Workers Registration Board
7. Guidelines on Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers, HK Social Workers Registration Board
8. A Proposal of Core Competencies, Educational Curriculum, and Ethical Principles for Buddhist Counseling (Revised 2018) - Proposal presented at the Buddhist Counselling - Instigating Insight into the Healing Process Symposium, Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.
9. Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, The American Psychological Association

ⁱ According to 《解脫道論》 (*The Path to Freedom Vimuttimaggā*), the seven qualities of a ‘Skillful and Compassionate Mentor’ (善知識) are as follows:-

Revered and endearing 可敬愛, Respectable 可重, Venerable 可貴, Eloquent 能說, Endurant in listening 忍辱, Able to deliver profound discourses 說深語, and Not residing in improper dwelling 不安非處