

Public Statement from the General Meeting of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives 2011

Dear Friends,

As many of you know, in May 2010 Rev. Master Eko Little was asked to resign as abbot of Shasta Abbey by the Shasta Abbey community when it was discovered that he had lied about having a romantic relationship with a member of the congregation. For a monk practising celibacy, any romantic relationship is inappropriate and unethical, and to then lie about it is a violation of both the Buddhist Precepts and the Rules of our Order. After his departure, there were further disclosures of what was considered to be his misuse of power and authority, betrayal of trust, and violations of sexual and ethical boundaries, often in the guise of spiritual teaching. We take these matters very seriously and deeply regret and apologize for the harm that has been caused.

Initial Response

The Order as a whole takes responsibility for the fact that this situation, involving a senior teacher, developed to the degree that it did within one of our monasteries. In particular, Rev. Master Haryo, as Head of the Order, and Rev. Master Meian, as vice-abbess, Rev. Master Daishin Yalon, and many of the other senior monks, have expressed their sense of personal responsibility and regret. Consequently we have been assessing everything we do to see how we can provide the safest possible environment for those who train with us.

The response from the Shasta Abbey community following these disclosures included:

- Offering spiritual counseling and professional psychological counseling for those affected.
- Community meetings were held and have been continued to allow monks to speak openly.
- Meetings were held with the local congregation to openly discuss what happened.
- Financial assistance was provided for those monastic disciples who wished to train in another temple.
- The monastic community has been studying the literature of other Buddhist groups who have gone through similar problems, to draw on their experiences and solutions.
- An invitation has been posted on the Shasta Abbey website for people to submit “concerns and comments” about their experiences in the monastery.
- Regular Dharma discussions amongst the monks and with the laity on the meaning of celibacy and sexuality in the context of religious training.

At the same time, an Order-wide review of our monastic structure, rules, and assumptions was initiated, and as part of this the OBC established an ethics working group and Shasta Abbey created its own ethics refuge committee (ethicssa@shastaabbey.org). In addition we commissioned the FaithTrust Institute (FTI) in April of this year to conduct an assessment of the misconduct of the former abbot of Shasta Abbey, its subsequent impact and implications, and how Shasta Abbey and the Order responded. We posted a statement on our websites about the FTI assessment and invited contributions, and we also provided contact information of lay members of our congregations with counseling skills for anyone with concerns about this or any other issue.

FTI was invited to conduct the assessment as they are experienced in helping religious organizations, including Buddhist ones, respond to clergy abuse and sexual boundary violations. Also, it was felt that using an independent agency would enable people to speak more freely. The subsequent report was prepared as a confidential statement for use by the membership of the OBC. We are grateful to the 35 monks and lay people, most of whom are currently still training in our Order, who came forward and shared with FTI their very personal and often painful experiences. The former Rev. Eko did not participate in this assessment.

The report discusses the factors at Shasta Abbey and in the wider Order that made it possible for the abbot, over a number of years and with a number of disciples, both lay and monastic, to abuse power and trust and to violate sexual boundaries. It also recommends improvements for a healthier, safer environment in which monks and lay people can train.

The Order welcomes this report from FTI and we are grateful to them for helping us see more clearly and respond to the many issues raised by these difficult and challenging events. The report is not intended to be a balanced account of training at Shasta Abbey and within our Order, and it does not stand against the gratitude that many feel for the positive ways in which the former abbot contributed to the monastery and helped his fellow trainees during the fourteen years of his tenure.

The Faith Trust Institute Report:

We asked Faith Trust Institute to conduct an assessment for us which had four aims:

1. To examine the extent of Eko's actions and how he was able to carry on these actions for as long as he did, his actions involving both monastics and members of the lay community.
2. How Shasta Abbey and the Order responded to those events.
3. To establish what lessons there are to be learned from looking at rules, procedures, communications, structures and policies and how these were interpreted, so that both the monastic and lay sanghas can be better protected in the future.
4. To ascertain and make recommendations as to the need for and provision of therapy, healing and closure for primarily the victims and secondarily the Order.

FTI received information about and descriptions of Eko's conduct when he served as abbot of Shasta Abbey from approximately 35 people through personal interviews, written statements and phone/Skype interviews. The respondents included senior and junior monks, former monks, lay ministers and lay disciples. Background documents concerning our structure, rules and practice were also given to the FTI. The assessment began in May 2011 and was completed in August 2011. The final report was circulated to members of the Order for discussion at the General Meeting held this September at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in the UK.

Summary of the FTI Report:

The assessment found that the former abbot of Shasta Abbey, Eko Little, had an escalating pattern of conduct spanning over 10 years that included betrayals of trust, sexual boundary violations, and misuse of power. He increasingly overstepped master/disciple boundaries with several lay and monastic disciples, at times for his sexual gratification, then abruptly ceased these relationships, causing spiritual and emotional harm. He maintained these abusive relationships with disciples through secrecy and manipulation and an authoritarian style of leadership. This style of leadership and his inability to listen to those around him gradually contributed to Eko isolating himself and Shasta Abbey from the rest of the Order.

The assessment found that senior monks, including the Head of the Order and the vice-abbess, failed to respond adequately to repeated disclosures in a timely fashion or invoke disciplinary procedures, believing that the allegations were not serious enough to warrant this course of action. There was a limited understanding of sexual boundary violations, and inadequate procedures for identifying patterns of abuse. Personal confrontations with Eko had little effect.

The assessment found that current OBC rules would have been adequate to deal with the situation had they been invoked. The assessment found, however, that many monks and lay people were ignorant as to their existence. Some specific changes to the wording of the rules are recommended.

The assessment found that structural and organizational weaknesses within the OBC allowed Eko to continue his unethical activities for an extended period of time. The trust inherent in the master/disciple relationship was abused by Eko to maintain secrecy. Disciples felt powerless to report any wrongdoing on Eko's part out of fear of reprisal. This problem was compounded when other seniors, not wanting to interfere in the master/disciple relationship, referred those disciples back to Eko to deal with their concerns.

Recommendations from FTI:

- A strengthening of the OBC rules to clarify standards of conduct for spiritual teachers and the process for complaints about misconduct.
- A re-examination of the leadership and organizational structure of the Order in order to reflect principles of greater accountability and transparency.
- Training in basic counseling, listening and teaching skills as well as teaching and discussion on healthy boundaries, sexuality and celibacy.
- Clarification, teaching and discussion of the master/disciple relationship.
- Improved communication, support, discussion and decision making. This should include raising awareness of OBC rules and procedures, and should include greater sharing of resources and encouraging monks to study at a number of temples within the Order.
- Clarification of the role of the Order vis a vis abbeys and temples.
- Continued exploration and implementation of an Ethics Committee, including steps to improve the safety of the lay and monastic sanghas. This could include the creation of an independent ombudsman.

Decisions made at the September, 2011 General Meeting:

At the General Meeting of the Order held in September this year we discussed in detail and agreed to the following practical steps:

1. The Interim Board of the OBC which was established at last year's General Meeting (www.obcinterimboard.org) will be continued for another year, its purpose being to facilitate better communication within the Order, and to address concerns as they arise.
2. A working group was authorized to review the Order's structure and function, including addressing the questions of greater transparency and accountability, and to make recommendations. This group will work directly with the Head of the Order.
3. The Order's Ethics Working Group will work on developing new rules, or additions to existing rules, to make it clear that sexualized behaviour within teaching relationships is completely inappropriate. The Group is also working towards the implementation of improved procedures for raising ethical concerns within the Order.
4. The Order's Ethics Working Group identified that in the rule on abuse of power (Section IV Rule 11), the warning to disciples to be careful in applying this rule to the behaviour of their master detracted from the intent of the rule. This wording has been removed. (FTI also pointed this out).
5. We will produce a publicly-available brochure or leaflet outlining what behaviour is considered appropriate, and what is not acceptable, in the relationship between a teacher and a disciple or student, whether monastic or lay, with reference to the rules of the Order which address this area.
6. We will ensure that in each temple of the Order specific teaching is offered to increase awareness and understanding of the Rules and their relationship to monastic and lay practice.
7. We will make our rules more accessible at temples of the Order by drawing attention to them on websites, and we will also produce a leaflet introducing the rules to those unfamiliar with them. We will produce a digest of those rules which are most relevant to the safety of all who train with our Order, so that these important rules are easier to find. There will also be a subject index to the rules, so that it is easier to locate those relating to a particular area.
8. Monks are encouraged to consult available resources on the topic of "healthy boundaries". In particular, the Head of the Order has asked that all monks watch a series of DVDs and read some material recommended by FTI, and have an opportunity to discuss this subject with each other. Many monks have already begun making use of these resources.

9. A provisional rule allowing for lay discipleship in the Order was clarified and finalized (Section II, Rule 14). A meeting of masters who have lay disciples was held, initiating a discussion of the issues relevant to that teaching relationship.
10. Ongoing education in the area of counseling and teaching for monks and lay ministers of the Order is under review.
11. We will assemble a resource of talks and information on various subjects relevant to monastic life and lay training. Topics addressed would include sexuality, celibacy, teaching, counseling, and healthy boundaries.
12. We welcome the formation of the Lay Initiative which we believe will facilitate greater links between lay and monastic sanghas, and will further two-way communication and teaching in the future.
13. To help our collective understanding of the master-disciple relationship, monks of the Order, and particularly masters, are invited to write and submit articles on their understanding of this relationship. We will compile a resource of these and other existing articles on this subject, and references to other relevant works.
14. There will be annual meetings for all masters who have monastic disciples, together with the Head of the Order. (In years when there is no General Meeting, these will be separate meetings in North America and Europe. In years when a General Meeting is scheduled, there will be a single combined meeting.)
15. In recognition of the fact that the isolation of any temple or individual has a detrimental effect on religious training, we will strengthen collaborative relationships between temples by encouraging monks to spend periods of time at other temples of the Order. One way that we hope to facilitate this is through a programme of exchange visits.
16. We will also explore how we can encourage collaboration by sharing resources between temples.
17. To help enable wide-spread refuge-taking within the Order, we will have a General Meeting of the Order every other year, the third one of which will be a Conclave to review the rules. (Conclaves may also be convened at any time). These meetings will alternate between North America and Europe.

Where we go from here:

Last year we started to examine ourselves and our practice and to review our structures, rules and procedures. The above decisions have been agreed to by consensus at this year's General Meeting, and we are committed to continuing this process of review. There will be a general assessment of our progress in implementing these decisions in about 18 month's time, and we will publish the outcome of this review.

We wish to acknowledge that pride and heavy-handed teaching methods have been a part of our culture for a long time. We acknowledge that at times this has had a detrimental effect on those who have practised with us, and we are committed to moving away from these attitudes in our collective training. Conversely, we aspire to actively cultivate humility, respect and kindness for people who practice with us at all levels of training.

We are deeply grateful for the Sangha Treasure and the precious opportunity of training together with those who come to our temples and meditation groups. We hope you will continue to train with us and support us in carrying out these important changes. Please feel free to contact any temple of the Order with questions and concerns you may have about any of the above.

In Gassho,
General Meeting of the OBC

Held at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, UK
29 September, 2011