



WHAT IS A



TRIRATNA

CENTRE?





The shrine at  
Adhithana, with rupas  
from Tiratna centres  
all round the world

## INTRODUCTION

In 2009, in a Q+A session with the Preceptors' College, Sangharakshita described four 'Lineages' of Triratna: the lineages of teaching, practice, inspiration, and a fourth, the organisational lineage or as he later called it, the 'lineage of responsibility', which he defined as 'the structures that need to be carried on and ... perhaps modified if they no longer fulfil their original purpose'.

In the summer of 2014, one of these structures came up for discussion at the International Council meeting. The Indian Area council raised a question: 'What is a *bona fide* Triratna Centre?'. The topic wasn't an abstract one: issues had arisen in some of our trusts that required greater clarity on what was and was not the practice of a *bona fide* Triratna Centre, and the Indian Public Preceptors' Kula asked the International Council for guidance. The question had arisen in other areas too, sometimes contentiously. It seemed that, if Triratna Centres were going to be part of a unified movement, there was a need to make it clearer what a Triratna Centre is.

Beginning in 2009, the series of papers emerging from conversations with Sangharakshita, beginning with *What is the Western Buddhist Order?*, made the fundamental elements of our teaching and practices more explicit. It also made some suggestions about the most important principles of our 'lineage of responsibility'.

4

5

WHAT IS A TRIRATNA CENTRE?


This document spells out in more detail some of the specific structures we have developed, or need to develop further, to put those principles into practice.

*What is a Triratna Centre?* focuses on Dharma teaching Centres, but most of the fundamental principles will apply to other kinds of Triratna organisations too, even if their details of their application might have to be adapted. It also recognises that Centres in different parts of the world are at different stages of development, and some situations will need time to put these conditions in place.

Much of what follows will already be familiar. This document grew from the 2014 International Council discussion. It draws on our existing practice, on the organisational principles and structures going back to our earliest Centres in the 1960s and 70s, and it was developed in careful consultation with Centre Chairs, Presidents and the College of Public Preceptors. At its August 2016 meeting, the International Council adopted the resulting document unanimously. We want to recommend these principles and structures to Triratna centres as important conditions that will help the Triratna Community to stay unified after Sangharakshita's death.

Dhammarati,  
*Convenor, Triratna International Council*

# THE LINEAGES OF TEACHING + PRACTICE



Dilgo Khyentse  
Rinpoche and  
Sangharakshita,  
Kalimpong, 1966



### 1. Founded on Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma

As Sangharakshita said in the 2009 paper, *What is the Western Buddhist Order?*, a spiritual community needs a 'high degree of commonality of practice'.

What is taught and practiced at Triratna Centres is founded on Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma, and is faithful to that. It comes from the common body of material derived from Sangharakshita and evolved through the procedures on Commonality of Practice agreed by the International Council, under the guidance of the Public Preceptors.

### 2. A progressive training encouraging deepening Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

Centres offer a progressive training at all levels, encouraging a deepening Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha through the progressive stages of commitment as Friend, Mitra and Order member.

Because deepening Going for Refuge is central to Triratna in this way, Dharma teaching is done by committed members of the Order, or where it is necessary, by Mitras under the supervision of Order members.

### 3. In harmony with the Preceptors College

Not all training can or should be done locally: individual Centres work in harmony with those with broad responsibility for the various aspects of training in Triratna, for example study, meditation, and preparation to join the Order. In particular, Triratna Centres co-operate and work in harmony with the Preceptors College which holds a special responsibility to preserve and develop Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

The background of the image is an ancient, weathered fresco. It depicts two figures, likely deities or royalty, from the chest up. The figure on the left is partially visible, with a face painted in light tones and dark, arched eyebrows. The figure on the right is more complete, showing a face with a serene expression, dark hair, and a red garment. The fresco is heavily cracked and discolored, with large areas of missing plaster revealing a lighter, textured surface underneath. The overall color palette is dominated by earthy tones: ochre, terracotta, and muted reds, contrasted with the dark outlines and the light skin tones of the figures.

THE LINEAGE OF  
**INSPIRATION**  
THE LINEAGE OF  
**RESPONSIBILITY**



**4. Linked to the whole community**

Each Triratna Centre is legally and financially autonomous but linked to the whole community through the shared Dharmic commitment of its Order members, a shared framework of teaching and practice, a network of kalyana mitrata that transcends individual Centres through the Order, and co-operation with other Centres through the structures of the Order and Movement.

12

**5. Presenting itself publicly as a part of Triratna**

It should be clear and public that each Centre is part of Triratna, under the guidance of the Order, and with Sangharakshita as our founding teacher.

**6. 'Control by the spiritually committed' and Participation of the Order**

A founding principle of the Triratna Buddhist Community is that those who run and 'control' a Centre should be spiritually committed.

In practice this means that Centres should be in the effective control, spiritually and legally, of members of the Order who are teaching and practicing in accordance with Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

A Triratna Centre is an expression of the altruistic activity of the Order. It is therefore by its very nature open to the influence of the Order as a whole and welcomes all Order members' participation, as appropriate. It cannot be owned or controlled exclusively by any particular individual or group.

13

WHAT IS A TRIRATNA CENTRE?

**6.1 Legal and Spiritual Responsibility**

Final responsibility for Centres should rest with all those Order members who are actively involved members so that legal control and spiritual responsibility are not separated.

Because responsibility for Centres rests with all Order members who are its members, there should be no special status for any individual or group of individuals, for instance through Life Membership or by having a legally controlling power.

## 6.2 Criteria

Participation in Centres should be open to all Order members who:

- understand and support the spiritual principles of the Triratna Community,
- are in harmony with the spirit of the Order,
- active in the Order's life, and
- have no serious conflicts with other Order members that have not been addressed.
- They should be in good standing with their own Preceptors and Kalyana Mitras, and
- not involved in any major breaches of the precepts.

When an Order member no longer fulfils those criteria, their membership of the charity should lapse.

## 6.3 Membership

Membership is at the discretion of the Trustees. However, legal membership of the governing Trust should be open to all Order members in the area of the Centre who participate to any extent in its activities, support its

specific objectives, and fulfil the criteria in 6.2 above. The underlying principle is that Order members working together should be functioning as members of a spiritual community. The voice of each should be taken seriously and they should be able to have an influence, especially in relation to the area of their own involvement and the degree of responsibility they are taking or are willing to take.

Trustees may dismiss anyone from membership who does not fulfil those criteria. But care should be taken that where dismissal is felt to be necessary, there is wider consultation with the President, Area Order Convenors, and local Public Preceptor's Kula.

## 6.4 Council / Trustees

The most important application of the principle that those who run and 'control' a charity should be spiritually committed is that it is Order members who become Trustees.

In some smaller situations, it may not be possible for all Trustees/Council members to be Order members. In that case, there should be a significant majority of Order members e.g. by Order members from other Centres joining the Council, although care should be taken that such Trustees from outside the Centre are not merely nominal. If Mitras who have asked for ordination join the



Council, they should have good links of Kalyana Mitrata with Order members, and there should be a clear way for Order members to exercise control when that is needed.

The Trustees/Council members, collectively and individually, carry the spiritual, legal, financial, and ethical responsibility for the Centre, in its day-to-day running and its overall policies and direction, and for ensuring that the Centre functions as a bona fide Triratna Centre.

Council members / Trustees are elected, usually annually at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) by the membership. The elected Council, therefore, is accountable to the membership.

### 6.5 Annual General Meeting (AGM)

Members should meet at least once a year for an Annual General Meeting at which the usual reports of office bearers are considered and the governing Council or Trust body is elected.

### 6.6 Office Bearers

The work of the Centre requires some of its members to take on particular responsibilities. *Bona fide* Centres,

therefore, would always include such posts as are required by their constitutions and such others as are necessary when resources make it possible.

An important factor in maintaining the unity of the Movement is the participation of Order members with key responsibilities like Chairs and Mitra Convenors in Movement-wide meetings with others who hold similar responsibilities.

Key posts include:

#### *Centre Chair*

The Chair should meet the criteria agreed at local and international Chairs' Assemblies.

#### *Appointment of the Chair*

According to charity law in some countries, it is the Council/Trustees that appoints officers of the charity, including the Chair. However, since the appointment is such an important one, it is wise to consult more widely with local Order members and other key Order members like the Centre President, before the council makes a decision.

#### *Mitra Convenors*

When a Centre has Mitras, it will have two Mitra Convenors where possible, one for women and one for

Order members from  
Dublin and Berlin  
centres at the LBC



men. They are responsible for the training of Mitras and ensuring they have effective kalyana mitrata.

### ***Appointment and criteria***

Mitra Convenors are appointed by local Order members through the Chapter system and in consultation with the Trustees. They should meet the criteria agreed by the Mitra Convenors' meetings locally and internationally.

### ***The President***

The system of Presidents is one of the unifying forces connecting local Centres with the wider Movement. A President has a principal responsibility for the ethical and spiritual values of a Centre, and the overall spiritual health of that Centre and its sangha.

The President is an experienced Order member who has a good understanding of Bhante's teaching and the approach of the Triratna Buddhist Community. The President's responsibility is mainly that of a Kalyana Mitrata to those involved with the centre, and their role is an advisory one.

So that the President keeps an independent position in relation to the Centre, he or she should not be directly involved in its activities and should be a regular but not constant visitor.

- He or she should not have any executive role, nor should he or she be the primary vision holder.

- A President should especially not be involved in executive decision making, to avoid a blurring of the lines between President, Chair, and even management of the Centre.

### ***Appointment and criteria.***

Because the President is a link between the local Centre and the wider Movement, the Trustees of a Centre appoint a President in dialogue with a body representing the wider Movement: we suggest the Area President's meeting where there is one, or the Area Council/Public Preceptors where there is not. Trustees should also consult chapters connected with the Centre.

Because of this Movement-wide dimension, the role of Presidents needs to be understood in the same way by the Movement and Order internationally. We suggest that the role of Presidents and the criteria for their appointment are agreed by the International Council after consultation with Chairs, Presidents and Public Preceptors.

### ***Teaching in a Triratna Centre***

The criteria for participation in a centre by Order members described in 6.2 above, apply, with one additional, more specific, criterion, to those teaching in a Triratna Centre. Anyone teaching should:

- **understand and support the spiritual principles of the Triratna Community, and our system of practice and training;**



- have an effective spiritual practice of that framework themselves;
  - be able to work in harmony with those with responsibility for the various aspects of training in Triratna, particularly with the Preceptors' College.
  - be in harmony with the spirit of the Order, active in the Order's life, and have no serious conflicts with other Order members that have not been addressed.
  - be in good standing with their own Preceptors + Kalyana Mitras,
  - not be involved in any major breaches of the precepts.
- have an understanding of the material to communicate it effectively at the level they're teaching.

22

## 7. Participation in the wider Movement

In order to maintain unity with other Triratna Centres, it is important that Order members in key roles take part in the local, national and Movement-wide meetings of Chairs and of Mitra Convenors, and work in accordance with the procedures agreed by, and collective decisions reached at, such meetings. Though this paper is primarily concerned with the structures of the Movement, the Movement's unity is supported in a fundamental way by the unity and proper functioning of the Order locally. It is important therefore that local Order Convenors also take part in the equivalent regional and international meetings where they exist.

## 8. Consensual Decision making

*'By its very nature as a free association of individuals sharing certain common goals the spiritual community is based on the love mode'.*

Sangharakshita, *The Ten Pillars*

Triratna Centres work co-operatively and consensually, and organisational decisions are made consensually whenever possible.

In exceptional circumstances where consensus has not been possible, charity constitutions make provision for decision by majority vote. On an issue that may cause serious disharmony in the Order, no decision should be taken without the agreement of the President and the Area Council.

## 9. Ownership and Assets

Assets of Centre Charities are held in appropriate legal structures (eg. a Trust), or by holding Trustees. If this is not possible, where assets are held on behalf of a Charity, there should be a clear legal agreement making sure that the interests of the Centre as a bona fide part of the Triratna Community are safeguarded.

23

WHAT IS A TRIRATNA CENTRE?



### 10. What is a Triratna Centre?

In the last few years, a handful of cases have raised the question of whether or not particular Centres meet the criteria for a bona fide Triratna Centre. On the basis of those cases, it is likely in future that questions may be raised in a number of ways: by Order members within a situation, by Order members from other Centres, or by Order members with wider responsibilities such as Presidents or Preceptors.

#### 10.1. A Procedure

Any evaluation and resolution of serious and sensitive issues should be friendly rather than litigious, and done in a spirit of kalyana mitrata using the agreed criteria as a framework. In the Vinaya-pitaka of the Pali Canon, the *Adhikarana-samatha*, the 'settlement of disputes' procedure, starts locally and informally. If a dispute can't be resolved in that way, the process draws on the wider Sangha and gradually becomes more formal.

An equivalent procedure can be used here: the question should be resolved at the most local level possible. If it can't be resolved at the local level, the process gradually becomes broader and more formal.

Different Centres and Areas will have different resources to draw on, but resources could include Centre Presidents, Area Chairs' Meetings, and the Area Council. Major steps might include:

#### 10.1.1 Local Trustees

Questions should first of all be raised with the Chair and Trustees of the Centre concerned, and addressed by them.

#### 10.1.2 The Movement in the Area

If the matter can't be resolved by local Trustees, the President should be asked to help. Where there is no President or if no resolution can be found in this way, a next step may be to take the matter to the Area Chairs meeting

#### 10.1.3 The Area Council

If the Movement in the Area is not able to resolve the matter, or for any reason chooses not to, the matter can be referred to the Area Council for resolution.

Members of the Area Council who are party to the dispute would recuse themselves from a decision.

#### 10.2 An Appeals Procedure

##### 10.2.1 The Steering Group

If either party does not agree with the decision of the Area Council, they can ask the International Council Steering Group to review the decision.



#### 10.2.2 *International Council Steering Group*

If the Area Council is not able to resolve the matter, or chooses not to, it can be referred to the International Council Steering Group for a final decision.

The Steering Group would also deal with an Appeal against a decision by the Area Council.

In the unlikely case that the Steering Group is not able to reach consensus, the College members on the Steering Group would make the decision to resolve deadlock

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