

## **Appointing Centre Chairs – Guidance for Centre Councils, updated December 13**

This is an updated version of a paper that was produced for the European Chairs Assembly in 2008. Centre Chairs are key people – having a big influence on the spiritual vitality of a local sangha. The following gives some guidelines on the responsibilities of a Chair, on the qualities that make for successful Chairing, and of procedures for appointing a Centre Chair. Obviously there will be a need to adapt the guidelines to particular situations, though the underlying principles will stay the same.

*Written by Vajragupta, December 2013*

### **A) The Responsibilities of a Centre Chair:**

It is not a "job" but a spiritual practice!

#### **1) Spiritual responsibility:**

- \* The Chair is responsible, in conjunction with other Order members, for ensuring, maintaining, and deepening the spiritual vitality of the Centre.
- \* They need to do this from a basis of strong personal spiritual inspiration and practice.
- \* The Chair is responsible for working with the Centre council, other Order members, and others at the Centre, to clarify the spiritual direction of the Centre. They need to be able to work with others in order to generate shared vision.
- \* The Chair ensures the Dharma is being taught at the centre in a way that is inspiring and relevant, and which is in harmony with Sangharakshita and Triratna's presentation of the Dharma.
- \* The Chair and Centre council also ensure that any communities and businesses associated with the Centre are spiritually vital and effective.
- \* The Chair will often officiate at Centre events (e.g. mitra ceremonies) and be a figurehead around the Centre.
- \* They need to be friendly and approachable to people round the Centre, and be respected by them.

#### **2) Responsibility to the wider Triratna Buddhist Community:**

- \* Each Centre is part of the Triratna Buddhist Community and so has a responsibility to help maintain the unity and integrity of our approach to the Dharma. The Chair needs to encourage those in their local situation to identify with the whole Triratna Buddhist Community and not just their local Centre, and to encourage harmony with the wider Order and Movement.
- \* Especially as the Movement gets larger and more diverse, it is important we forge strong links and lines of communication amongst us to maintain unity, trust and harmony, and to learn from each other and support each other.
- \* In Europe, the Chair will ideally attend the two meetings of the European Chairs Assembly (ECA) per year. Outside Europe, they would ideally be linked-in with other Chairs in their region, and also attend ECA meetings when those meetings are open to Chairs from outside Europe.

#### **3) Legal and financial responsibility:**

- \* The Chair is responsible, in conjunction with the trustees, for ensuring the charity is run according to its own constitution as well as charity law<sup>1</sup>.
- \* The Chair oversees the financial wellbeing of the charity, and its organisational structures, checking the charity is being run efficiently and effectively.
- \* The Chair will facilitate trustee (council) meetings in the light of the above, ensuring other trustees understand their legal responsibilities, and that trustees and council meetings have adequate information to stay informed and make necessary decisions.
- \* At the same time as all of the above, a Chair needs to not get caught up in administration and business at the expense of the spiritual welfare of the Centre – i.e. they need to be able to delegate effectively and involve others.

#### **4) Responsibility in the wider community:**

- \* The Chair may act as a figurehead and representative of the Centre in the wider community, or see possibilities for establishing links with others in the local community (for example, meeting other Buddhists, inter-faith groups, local actions groups, or local government authorities).
- \* The Chair supports those at the Centre playing a positive role in the community and ensures they are keeping up the good reputation of the Centre (for example, those doing school visits, or socially engaged Buddhist projects in the Centre's name).

## **B) Qualities for Successful Chairing:**

*The following list suggests the kinds of qualities that make for successful Chairing of a Centre. **Please note!** The trouble with these kinds of lists is they come across as very idealistic and a potentially good Chairperson may feel they could never possibly live up to them, and may even be discouraged! That is definitely not our intention. Please take this list as a guide to the kinds of issues a potential Chair needs to be thinking about and talking through with their spiritual friends. It is not a list of "requirements" that you need to manifest fully and perfectly at all times, it is more trying to suggest something of the qualities that we are trying to practice, and to highlight the underlying reasons why these qualities are important. It is also not a fixed set of criterion as sometimes there will be exceptions – e.g. someone becoming a Chair before they've been ordained for 5 years.*

- \* A prospective Chair will have been ordained for 5+ years – i.e. they are an experienced Order member, with a maturity and stability in their Going for Refuge. They will have experience of teaching and working for Triratna, usually with a history of involvement in the Centre.
- \* They need to be spiritually inspired and effective, and able to protect and maintain their own practice during busy or difficult times. They will have an effective meditation practice, go regularly on retreat (including solitary retreats), practice the ten precepts, study regularly, and attend chapter meetings and Order weekends.
- \* They need to be able to communicate with confidence, as well as to exemplify as best they can in their life, Dharma practice – particularly practice in the tradition of Sangharakshita and the Triratna Buddhist Community. In order to do this, they need to have no serious doubts about Bhante and the Triratna approach to the Dharma.
- \* They will be in good communication with their own Preceptors and Kalyana Mitras and the Centre President, so they can get support in their role. They will be active in the life of the Order and Movement, and connected-in through effective friendships and relationships.
- \* They need to be willing to work with the Council, key Order members, and President of the Centre. They need to be trusted, and able to communicate with a wide range of Order members, Mitras, and friends around a Centre, able to listen to different perspectives, help “hold” and facilitate discussion on controversial issues, and offer guidance on the spiritual principles involved. Sometimes this will involve being open to criticism and comment from others. They need to understand, and be able to work with, the principle of consensus.
- \* They need to be able to act as kalyana mitras to others, to understand and work with issues of projection and not be prone to inflation. They also need to be clear and careful around sexual ethics – as problems in this area can be very damaging in a sangha.
- \* They need to have the time and energy to be the Chair. Usually Centre Chairs of larger Centres work full-time at the Centre, but this is not always the case.
- \* Ideally, they also have time to attend both Chairs meetings – a week in January and ten days in July each year. Most Chairs find these meetings extremely helpful and supportive.
- \* They need to be able to commit to the job for at least five years. (It can take two or three years to really find your feet.) Ideally they will stay on in the job until their successor is ready to begin. Part of their responsibility is to “hand on the baton” to the next person.

## **C) Procedure for Appointing New Chairs:**

*Spiritually speaking it is the Centre council who holds the responsibility for the well-being of the Centre and who, therefore, is ultimately responsible for appointing a new Chair. Legally speaking, it is also the council (trustees) who appoint officers of the charity, including the Chairperson. However, since the appointment is such an important one, it seems wise to consult more widely. There are four kinds of discussion that need to take place:*

### 1) Personal and Spiritual:

That person needs to talk in an appropriate context, with Order members who know them, about the wisdom of them taking on the role, and their ability to engage with it effectively. Maybe this discussion will be in their chapter, or maybe the council is able to function in this kind of way. They will also consult with their Preceptor and Kalyana Mitras.

### 2) Council discussion:

The council needs to discuss the candidate from the point of view of the Centre, and those who are closely involved in the Centre. What are the particular needs of the Centre at this time? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the situation; and how will the candidate impact on them? They may then draw up a more detailed job description for the chair, and be clear and explicit about what support he or she will receive – financial, retreats, and mentoring and other support.

### 3) Consultation with other key Order members:

It will be wise for the Council to consult with other Order members who are involved in the Centre, listening to their views, carrying out more dialogue, before making a final decision. The wider the base of support a new chair has the better. This will be done in different ways – for example depending on the size of the situation. The Development Team can also provide you with a document produced by Order members in Sheffield – describing the process of appointing a new chair amongst Sheffield Order members.

### 4) Consultation with the Centre President or with an experienced Order member connected to the wider Movement:

Another person who will be consulted will be the President of the Centre – someone who has experience and perspective and who is linked-in to other Presidents and other parts of the Movement. If your Centre does not have a President, please contact [dhammadassin@triratnadevelopment.org](mailto:dhammadassin@triratnadevelopment.org) – Dhammadassin is "secretary" to the Presidents meeting and can arrange someone to help in your situation.

## **D) A ritual to inaugurate the new chair:**

Often Centres will create a special ritual for the whole sangha to welcome and inaugurate a new Chair or Mitra Convenor – again bringing out the spiritual significance of the occasion for the person individually and for the sangha. Local sanghas may have their own traditions as to how this is done – for example sometimes there is an "emblem" of office such as a jewel, mala, or vajra that is ceremonially placed on the shrine by the out-going Chair, and then taken-up by the new Chair.

## **E) Reviewing:**

It might also be helpful to have a review every 1 to 2 years. This could firstly take place in a chapter-like context: giving the Chair an opportunity to talk about how they are faring with the spiritual challenges involved. Perhaps they could report-in on their experience (using A and B above as "templates") and then invite feedback. Secondly, there could be a council review of how the Chair is doing in relation to them and the overall needs of the Centre. Again this could involve the Chair reporting-in on how they are doing (based on A and B above) and inviting feedback. All this can be done in a spirit of helping and supporting someone who has taken on a challenging role!

---

<sup>i</sup> Or the relevant laws where the Centre is not a charity but legally constituted in some other form.