

How Do We Have the Difficult Conversations?

Building reconciliation and a sustainable basis of trust for Triratna
by Lokeshvara, October 2018

We want to update everybody who has been following the work of the Adhithana Kula. (See [endnote 1.](#)) This post will mainly focus on our considerations and conclusions as to whether some form of external independent inquiry was needed to look into difficult aspects of Triratna's past and culture.

Our wish is that the debates that were reignited following a BBC local tv report in September 2016, and the attention the Kula gave to these, were the beginnings of what we hope will amount to a culture change. We could describe this culture change as something like “*not being afraid of the difficult conversations*”.

Everything we have tried to do falls within this expressed framework of not being afraid to have difficult conversations; whether between individuals, within the communities focused around our Buddhist Centres, or the wider world and other interested parties; conversations about certain issues or norms that we need to identify, examine and evaluate. As we indicated in the first post on the Adhithana Kula blog in March 2017, right from the start we have been learning to acknowledge, express regret for and learn from aspects of our culture which were unhelpful or harmful, as well as where they were good or right, but applied badly.

Read: [Introducing the Adhithana Kula](#)

An external independent inquiry?

As part of our work we heard some requests for an independent process to help us move towards reconciliation and restoring trust. Some of these requests called explicitly for an external inquiry, so we want to share our thinking quite carefully on this matter.

Mindful of the harm caused to some in Triratna, and the concerns of many people about this, we took these calls very seriously and set out to establish how such a process might proceed and whether an independent inquiry would be a helpful part of it. We sought to research approaches and methods with an eye to what might be acceptable to both those in Triratna and those without, so that it might best build bridges and trust, as well as providing a platform for reconciliation and closure where needed.

We want to offer here the process we went through, as well as our thinking so far and the reasons for them, using four assumptions and principles as a framework:

1. *Research*: what methods have been used in comparable situations in other Buddhist traditions?
2. *Seeking external opinion*: from other Buddhist traditions
3. *Safeguarding*: supporting the work of Triratna's Safeguarding team
4. *Openness*: placing as much as permissible of the controversial aspects of our past in the public domain

1. Research

Our aspiration was to try to help find a clear methodology to:

- help restore trust, where it had been damaged or broken
- foster reconciliation and closure where needed and
- provide a level of objectivity beneficial to everyone

As part of this, we were open to the idea of some form of external inquiry.

We began by reading reports (see endnote 2) from external inquiries from a range of educational institutions and religious communities. We could see some benefits: they provided a detached, authoritative viewpoint and were usually able to give a voice to those who had been hurt, harmed or neglected in their own community.

We found that these inquiries almost always operated alongside criminal court cases and within a framework where the most important questions appeared to be “Who is to blame?”, “What rules have been broken?” and, frequently, “Who needs to be punished?”

They rarely seemed to offer a way of repairing trust or connection within communities, nor did they seem to offer any clear way to deal with contradictory accounts of historical events.

Had the controversial aspects of Triratna's past involved criminal allegations, we would automatically have instituted an external inquiry. The Triratna Safeguarding team (see point 3) have established that the police are well aware of the allegations against Sangharakshita and that nothing which has been reported to them is criminal. Any allegations against anyone else involving any possibility of criminality whatsoever have

been reported to the police and/or Charity Commission by the Safeguarding team, where possible in consultation with those who may have been harmed.

Here, the requirements of data protection law and Safeguarding prevent us from giving any details, rather than any lack of desire to be transparent. (See [endnote 3.](#))

In addition we have looked carefully at the recommendations arising from external reports into criminal sexual misconduct on the part of religious teachers and leaders in other traditions. While we are not complacent, we did find that Triratna was already implementing many of these. (See [endnote 4.](#))

A couple of Order members recommended we contact *An Olive Branch* (<http://www.an-olive-branch.org>), a Buddhist organisation in North America which works towards reconciliation within Buddhist communities by allowing stories to be told. This we did, and we liked their principles. However, because they are based in North America and most of the work, healing and conversation we needed was in the UK, we - and they - felt their involvement would be impractical. At the same time, we remain open to using or consulting with them in the future.

There being no comparable body within the UK or the rest of Europe, our continuing search led us to Restorative process. This is the process we recommended to our community.

We were introduced to the methodology of Restorative process, firstly through Jnanasiddhi, an Order member who works in this field, and then through making contact with Janine Carroll, Director of Restorative Now (<http://restorativenow.com>). We felt this approach offered the best chance for real communication and reconciliation, in line with our Buddhist values. We have written about this already on the Adhithana Kula blog (see: '[Why the Restorative Approach?](#)' by Ratnadharini), but to summarise, in the words of Janine Carroll:

“Restorative practice recognises the harm conflict causes to relationships, and seeks to redress this by emphasising that the ownership of both the problem and the solution lies with the key parties involved... a Restorative approach places relationships at the heart of the process with a focus on addressing harm.”

We felt these principles aligned very closely with the ethical foundations of Buddhism as we understand them. This is commonly described simply as 'taking responsibility', which means taking responsibility for the consequences of all of our actions, all our disharmony and its repair. The Restorative approach needs testing, so the early cases in

which we have begun to use it are considered by us a preliminary “checking” of the methodology, which we intend to review.

Another reason we chose this approach is that it can be scaled up to work with larger groups of people (this process is called "Restorative circles") not only with individuals or very small groups (when it is called “Restorative conversations”).

It is important to note that Restorative process cannot replace the proper reporting and prosecution of criminal allegations. If criminal allegations (or rumours or suspicions of criminal activity) arise in the course of Restorative process they must be reported to the Safeguarding team, who will report them to the police.

[Listen to Ratnadhara and Shantigarbha talk about the Restorative Process in Triratna](#)

2. Seeking external opinion

We decided to contact respected Buddhist teachers from other communities, to share with them the issues we are dealing with and our proposed responses; to seek their advice and ask their opinion – including about whether they thought we should commission an external inquiry. We also asked for any further suggestions or recommendations they might have.

Because these were private conversations we haven't published names, but we plan to go back and ask some of these teachers to do a final assessment and review of the Kula's work, and we may be able to publish this as a public document.

These contacts were in the form of one-to-one conversations with individual members of the Adhithana Kula, and so far we have had six such conversations. Most of these Buddhist teachers already knew something of the history of Triratna and had been following, or were aware of, the Kula and the blog page we had established on The Buddhist Centre Online.

See: [The Adhithana Kula blog](#).

The conversations are a little hard to sum up but we have arrived at four points:

1. They said we weren't alone: other Buddhist communities have had similar difficulties.

2. They felt we were tackling Triratna's issues in a reasonable and appropriate way.
3. Nobody thought our situation merited an external inquiry, based on what they understood of the issues.
4. One person whose community had implemented an independent inquiry noted some benefits, but also thought it had reduced the opportunity within the community for really taking responsibility for mistakes from the past.

3. Safeguarding

It became clear to the Adhithana Kula that, alongside the reconciliation and Restorative work we proposed to do to address harm, it would be important to establish model grievance, complaint and conflict resolution protocols, to sit alongside existing Safeguarding policies and Triratna's Ethical guidelines.

Read: [Triratna's Safeguarding Policies and Ethical Guidelines, 2018](#)

Triratna's Safeguarding officer, Munisha, has been developing model Safeguarding policies, practice and training for all its UK Centres since 2013, as required by the UK Charity Commission, law and nationally agreed UK Safeguarding requirements. She now has a Safeguarding team, which works as part of Triratna's Ethics Kula.

The Safeguarding team works with advice from external Safeguarding bodies such as [Thirtyone:eight](#) (previously known as CCPAS) who have also provided two training days for the Safeguarding officers and trustees of Triratna's UK centres. It also benefits from the expertise of a number of people within Triratna who work professionally in Safeguarding and criminal justice.

New model policies now in development in Triratna include those on bullying, whistleblowing, grievance and complaint, as well as for trans/non-binary people and those with disabilities.

Read: [More about Safeguarding in Triratna](#)

Contact the Safeguarding team: safeguarding@triratnadevelopment.org

4. Openness

So far our method has been to publish widely as much information as we can, some of it within Triratna, but most of it in the public domain on [the Adhithana Kula page](#) on the Buddhist Centre Online.

The Frequently Asked Questions document is available to all on the Adhithana Kula page. This is an extensive public document addressing controversial questions from Triratna's past, compiled by the Adhithana Kula and Triratna's Safeguarding team.

Read: [Triratna Controversy FAQ](#)

Aside from the FAQ and other Adhithana Kula posts, and indeed before the Kula was set up, Triratna's main web platform, The Buddhist Centre Online, had established an Order-member blog called 'Stories of the Past and Present (Looking to the Future)'. This was created as an Order-only resource because some Order members told us explicitly that they did not want to post their story on a public space, and we felt this would encourage and support a high degree of openness and frankness. Order members were invited to tell their stories freely and allow comments from other Order members. So far there are 90+ stories and 1000+ comments posted, telling a full range of experiences - positive, damaging and mixed. Most of the stories related to, or referenced, the early decades of Triratna, especially the 1970s and 1980s, and have most relevance for those who were ordained or were around during that time.

We recognise that we haven't yet had a dedicated space for Friends, Mitras, and ex-Triratna people, including ex-Order members, though various social media groups have been set up independently. We also haven't yet settled on a formal way of telling some of these stories more widely, as part of our own collective history. This is something that we intend to address in the future.

We are still learning from this, and there are questions that we still have to answer satisfactorily. For example:

1. What kind of moderation is appropriate for such a blog?
2. Is it wise or helpful to include stories about current grievances, and how do we respond to these, both to the complainant and the 'accused'?

3. The “Stories of the Past and Present” blog is only open to Order members, so we still need to get clear about what can we offer to others, for example those not ordained, or those who have resigned.

Conclusion

All members of the Adhithana Kula deeply regret any harm caused in Triratna’s past and remain committed to the work of addressing this. We hope that the actions we have taken and will take, the advice we are grateful to be receiving, and the open, Restorative culture we are encouraging our community to build, will all help us in our efforts to build a more healthy and harmonious Triratna for the future; one that can continue to take the teachings of the Buddha out into the world.

Although since January 2018 the Adhithana Kula has no longer been meeting regularly, we want to affirm that the work that the Kula participated in, with many others in our community, continues. We do not see it as “job done”. Three new groups take this work forward (see endnote 5):

- The College Chair’s Council is a new advisory body, established by the Chair of Triratna’s College of Public Preceptors to look at the key issues and principles of our community.
- The Restorative Working Group takes forward the work of addressing harm and difficulty.
- The Ethics Kula, including the Triratna Safeguarding team, is addressing all of the most serious ethical issues, and all the Safeguarding processes and training that have been developing since 2013.

We are confident that these three groups will ensure continuing improvement in our understanding of the ethical issues which have arisen in Triratna, and the measures needed to avoid such mistakes in future.

However, as the work of looking at our past continues and understanding deepens, there remains the possibility of external scrutiny should further concerns emerge which merit outside help.

Endnotes

1. From the first post, Introducing the Adhithana kula: *“In early February 2017 a group of six Order members began meeting daily at Adhithana to follow up and engage further with the discussion of issues that have been raised; we are calling ourselves the ‘Adhithana Kula’ (‘kula’ means something like ‘clan’). Between us we hold responsibilities in the major Triratna institutions and are able to be in communication with Sangharakshita. We will be consulting widely, and are following the debate already taking place online, but are keen to see more voices included in face-to-face communication throughout the Order and Community. We want to acknowledge the problematic aspects of our past, while not wanting to dismiss so much that is positive in what Sangharakshita and so many of us have managed to bring into being over the first 50 years of our community”.*

2. For example see “An Abuse of Faith”, a report commissioned by the Church of England.

3. It is a UK Safeguarding requirement that any current or historical criminal allegation of harm to a child who is still a child at the time of reporting must be reported to the relevant child protection authorities, whether police or social services, with or without the child’s consent. However, in the case of an adult victim, or a child victim who is adult at the time of reporting, it is best practice for the process and degree of reporting to be agreed if possible with the person concerned.

However, in all cases nobody has a right to know any details except those few who need to know in order to deal with the matter effectively and prevent further harm. This is to protect the alleged victim from harm, and to avoid jeopardising police investigations. It is also a requirement that a person alleged to have committed a crime may not be named unless they have been formally charged by the police.

These are the requirements followed by Triratna’s Safeguarding team.

4. See the recommendations from the Church of England report in note 2, and those in the more recent report from the investigation of allegations against Sogyal Rinpoche and Rigpa.

5. The three new bodies:

- The College Chair’s Council (CCC) is brought together by the College Chair to support his or her work. It is not intended to become an executive decision-

making body. Any proposals from the CCC would need to go to other bodies with the authority to implement them.

It has a core membership that includes the Chair of the College, one of the two Deputy Chairs, the Chair of the International Council, and the two International Order Convenors (currently this means Saddhaloka, Ratnadharini, Dhammarati, Aryajaya and Lokeshvara). Around this core is envisaged a wider, flexible, membership drawing in opinion and experience from those in the Order such as Centre Chairs and Mitra Convenors, visiting Order members from overseas, and Order members with professional skills such as facilitation or strategic thinking.

- The Restorative Working Group's current membership is Jnanasiddhi, Shantigarbha and Ratnadharini.
- The Ethics Kula: current membership is Jnanasiddhi, Lokeshvara, Saddhaloka, Parami and the Safeguarding team, who are Munisha and Amaladipa.