

Marriage/Partnership ceremonies in Triratna Centres

Munisha, November 2010

Though this topic has arisen with reference to UK law, it's relevant to all Triratna centres outside India. The UK government is now consulting on the implementation of legal changes which will soon allow legal same-sex partnership ceremonies to be held in places of worship, *should they wish to*.

Triratna centres have no collective formal policy on the holding of marriages in their buildings, let alone same-sex partnership ceremonies. The question has arisen several times at various UK centres in the last couple of years. To save ourselves reinventing the wheel every time it comes up, I offer some information and thoughts - and a proposal, with which Bhante agrees.

Since the Civil Partnership Act 2004, UK law has offered Civil Partnership ceremonies for same-sex couples wishing to establish themselves as a legal entity – different from but equivalent to heterosexual civil marriage. Until now, they have been forbidden from taking place in any building “designed for or used solely for religious purposes”.

However our Centres, often used for a broader range of purposes, have been able to register as secular venues for civil weddings, like a hotel or stately home. One UK Triratna centre has been registered in this way. The legal ceremony must contain no religious content, though this section may be sandwiched between religious sections.

Under the proposed changes, Civil Partnership ceremonies in places of worship will remain legally secular ceremonies, though they may be complemented by separate, non-legal, religious ceremonies.

A proposal, of which Bhante approves

Any Triratna Buddhist Centre may host Buddhist (non-legal) ceremonies for same- or opposite-sex couples, but no legal ceremonies may take place there. If Triratna couples wish also to have legal marriage or Civil Partnership ceremonies these should take place at secular venues.

Such ceremonies should be drawn up by the couple and the celebrant and centred on the Refugees and Precepts. The purpose of such a ritual is for the couple's spiritual friends to witness their commitment to Going For Refuge to the Three Jewels and living by the precepts in this relationship – as in all their other relationships. In other words, we are saying that this relationship is not special except in the sense that one-to-one intimate relationships can be particularly demanding ethically; all relationships should be an expression of our commitment to Going for Refuge and to the Precepts.

These ceremonies should be weighty and simple; a small gathering of close spiritual friends witnessing two people's spiritual commitment in this relationship, rather than a large sangha gathering to celebrate a romantic relationship.

To prevent Triratna centres becoming fashionable venues for lucrative Buddhist blessing ceremonies, we should provide such ceremonies only for established members of our sangha: say, Order members and mitras of at least a year's standing.

We invite couples to consider which they really need:

1. A legal ceremony, establishing legal rights in inheritance etc, which may be a good idea if there are children or shared property, and/or
2. A spiritual ceremony, in which both people make a commitment to Going For Refuge to the Three Jewels and to the Precepts in this relationship.

These two things do not necessarily go hand in hand.

It's worth noting that if our Centres do not provide legal ceremonies for same- or opposite-sex couples we will be in the amusing position of being probably the only UK religious denomination practising complete equality in this way, rather than the opposite!

Bhante's views

Bhante tells me he agrees with all the above, but also comments that this is not a topic to which he has given much thought, and one which he finds very boring! Below are notes of two conversations with Bhante over the last couple of years. He is completely opposed to any legal ceremonies taking place in our Centres, though he does accept that some couples (same- or opposite-sex) may find value in small informal ceremonies at a Buddhist Centre.

Appendices

1) Vajratara's notes from a conversation with Bhante

Bhante made the point that there is no such thing as a Buddhist wedding. In a Buddhist country, the couple usually visit the Temple after their wedding ceremony and reception in order to ask for a blessing from a monk. They do not bring the whole wedding party with them. Bhante suggested that we follow that example.

If an Order Member or Mitra wanted to get married, the legal part of the ceremony and the reception could take place elsewhere, and the couple, with perhaps a few close friends and relatives, could visit the Buddhist Centre for a blessing.

The blessing ceremony could be a puja with the three traditional offerings, blessings and a short talk by an Order Member exhorting the couple to live as Buddhists.

Bhante emphasised that there should be no full scale wedding and reception at a Buddhist Centre, nor should an Order Member go to the wedding ceremony or reception to give a blessing as part of their celebrations (though they could go as a guest). The principle is that the reception and wedding itself should be kept entirely separate from the blessings so that in no way could the wedding be interpreted as a Buddhist wedding.

Bhante was also keen that the couple should be reminded to keep the wedding as simple as possible and not spend a lot of money on the ceremony. Any anniversaries could be similarly marked with a party elsewhere and a blessing at the Buddhist Centre.

2) Munisha's notes from a conversation with Bhante, November 2010

Could a Buddhist Centre ever be licensed for legal wedding/partnership ceremonies?

Bhante said, simply "No".

Does this apply equally to opposite and same-sex couples?

Bhante said "Of course, otherwise it would be discriminatory."

When it comes to non-legal blessing ceremonies, I know you are against large gatherings. Do you feel the same about small gatherings, a bit like a kalyana mitra ceremony?

Bhante said he would prefer us not to have even small gatherings, but if people really did want to have a blessing, that was OK if it was small. But, he added, this would not be like a kalyana mitra ceremony, because a kalyana mitra ceremony was Dharmic, whereas he didn't see relationship ceremonies as Dharmic; though of course there were ethics involved.

I have suggested that blessing ceremonies should be held only for established members of the Triratna sangha, say mitras of at least one year's standing, or Order members. Do you agree with that?

Bhante said "Yes".

Do you still stand by your statement that there is no such thing as Buddhist marriage?

Bhante said "Yes! There is no such thing as Buddhist marriage per se. However, of course that is not to say that if you are married you will not apply Buddhist principles within your marriage."

Do you see any value in non-legal ceremonies centred on Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, and to the Five Precepts?

Bhante said he could see that couples might need help to live up to their spiritual and ethical ideals within their marriages/partnerships.

3) Email from Vishvapani (North London Buddhist Centre President) to Visuddhimati (NLBC Chair), October 2010 (edited for publication in *Shabda*)

Dear Visuddhimati,

...When Kamalagita and I decided to marry about a year ago our initial thoughts were to have the main ritual in the Manchester Buddhist Centre, and we booked the date with the centre. We booked a Registry Office for the previous day and planned to have a reception on the same evening. Then, reading through NLBC Council material I saw the message from Vajratara to the mitra convenors, which you copied to me. I spoke with Dhammarati, and he consulted with Subhuti, as I had in mind the paper by Subhuti which Lokabandhu has sent you: I had thought that perhaps Kamalagita and I could be the first people ever to implement his ideas (barring the business of getting everyone's say-so), but Vajratara's note made me think again. Eventually, I spoke to Bhante himself.

What came out of that was that Bhante has a clear view that centres shouldn't become venues for large-scale wedding ceremonies. Simpler blessings were fine, though, attended by the couple, a celebrant and a few others from the sangha, but not the whole wedding party. His main point was that generally in Buddhist tradition temples and viharas don't host weddings. These are seen as lay and, in effect, secular affairs, which don't need to be sanctified. For Order members, he suggested, marriage came within the sphere of ethics. We decided to go with this.

We decided that we would have a blessing. We ended up with a ceremony with Dayanandi (Kamalagita's Private Preceptor) in which we reaffirmed our commitment to the Three Jewels and then spoke verses of confession and forgiveness to each other.

In the end, all this felt fine. The Buddhist Centre ceremony was strong and meaningful for us, and I quite enjoyed the intimacy of it. We made more of the register office wedding than we otherwise might have, and we had a great party...

Vishvapani