Decision-Making in Triratna

1) Why are we exploring decision-making in Triratna?

At the last International Council Meeting we explored the lineage of responsibility. We heard personal testimonies of how people have taken positions of responsibility to live out their vision and inspiration in Triratna. However, we also heard how the initiative of those who have taken responsibility is sometimes hindered by a lack of clarity regarding authority, agency, and decision-making:

> ***"One of the reasons why it can be difficult to take leadership roles is because of a sense of sensitivity around the complexities of leadership and the complexities of power."***
>
> ***"We need the autonomy and initiative to serve the way that we think it's best to do but we also need to consult and that's the challenge - and that comes down to the need for clarity."***
>
> ***"Lack of clarity about the extent to which the individual has agency in relation to decision-making."***
>
> ***"The cultural norm of consensus decision-making can turn into tyranny of the minority."***

At the September 2023 online International Council meeting we will draw on our own experiences and reflections, as well as the suggestions made by those who have previously explored this territory (see i below) to:

- Share and agree the principles that inform how we make decisions in Triratna.
- Clarify what is meant by consensus and consensual decision-making.
- Determine when consensus and consensual decision-making is (and is not) most appropriate.

What follows is a synthesis of reflections from several contributors. It does not (and is not intended to) present a definitive perspective on decision-making in Triratna. Instead, it aims to orientate you towards the theme and stimulate you to clarify your own thinking on the topic prior to our meeting.

2) Decision-making in the Buddhist tradition

For decisions to be trusted and have influence within the sangha there needs to be a widely shared and agreed understanding of how they are made.

A basic and universally accepted Buddhist principle is that all actions, including decisions, should avoid the coercive use of power and instead be rooted in metta or, as Bhante describes it, the 'love mode'.

In practice, this means that the decision-making process should strive for the highest level of harmony and agreement possible. This aspiration is evident within the early sangha where all the local monks residing within the boundaries of the vihara or monastery participated in sangha decisions. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, they had a duty to do so.

When disputes arose there were procedures for dealing with them. As a last resort issues could be resolved by *"acting in accordance with the majority"* - a vote. However, it is important to note that the leader of the monastic assembly - usually the most senior monk who had the confidence of the sangha - could veto decisions that were contrary to the dharma or threatened the unity of the sangha. Likewise, older monks could ask younger monks to relinquish their opposition to a decision if they thought it compromised an important law or principle. So, whilst there was a clear aspiration for inclusivity in decisions relating to the sangha this must be seen within the context of a hierarchical order where senior monks had the authority to influence and even veto decisions.

Triratna broadly follows this traditional model by practising bounded forms of participatory decision-making whilst simultaneously also investing decision-making authority on certain weighty issues to the most senior institutions and Order members. For example, the decision to admit someone to (or suspend or expel someone from) the Order, rests with a College Kula of at least five Public Preceptors although they will consult other Order members (unless there is an obvious need for confidentiality).

3) The relationship between responsibility and authority

Bhante created the FWBO/Triratna in a way that honours basic traditional Buddhist values. He formed what is known in systems theory as a 'small world' – a network of networks - comprising the College as the keystone of the architecture of the movement; the Regional, Area and International Order Convenors; the International Council; the Chairs Assemblies; Presidents' Meetings and so on.

It is self-evident that responsibility must be matched by the authority to undertake those responsibilities. Consequently, all the above Triratna bodies (and others) have authority within their defined spheres of concern and responsibility. This is laid out, for example, in the working practices of the College and International Council; the legal structures of centres; and the principles described in 'What is a Triratna Centre'.

4) Authority and coercive power

Bhante's states in his talk *'Authority and the Individual in the New Society'* (see ii below):

> ***"The spiritual community [...] cannot exist with power. As soon as one exercises power, that is to say as soon as one coerces, one ceases to treat others as individuals, that is to say, true individuals and as soon as one ceases to treat others as individuals, as true individuals the spiritual community ceases to exist."***

However, the dictionary definition of authority is, as Bhante himself acknowledged, quite broad. Whilst it certainly includes aspects consistent with the coercive use of power, it also includes non-coercive aspects such as "responsibility for particular areas of activity". It is in this second non-coercive sense that the term 'authority' is being used in this paper.

5) The allocation and delegation of authority to make decisions

By whom, how and to whom is authority - including the authority to make decisions - allocated or delegated once the need for a particular responsibility has been identified?

Bhante stated, "In some respects we are hierarchical, in some we are democratic" and this is borne out by the two main ways in which individuals are appointed to positions and bodies with decision-making authority within Triratna.

Hierarchical appointments tend to be the norm for roles primarily concerned with preserving the lineage, integrity and unity of the Triratna Order. Those who have experience of this responsibility 'hand on' and share it with trusted individuals. This is exemplified in the appointment of preceptors. Handing on and sharing responsibilities in this way was deliberately initiated by Bhante based on traditional models.

Appointments to roles primarily concerned with the day-to-day organisational functioning of Triratna are usually advertised and anyone with the requisite qualifications, skills and attributes may apply. The selection and appointment is usually made consensually. This more democratic approach is exemplified in the appointment of chairs by centre councils.

In practice, the hierarchical and consensual (democratic) methods of appointment often incorporate elements of the other, albeit to varying degrees. For example, it would be unusual to appoint a preceptor without consulting widely about their suitability. Likewise, it would be unusual to appoint a centre chair if senior Order members had serious concerns about their fidelity to Bhante's interpretation of the Dharma and Triratna.

6). Different approaches to 'consensus'

Decision-making theory and practices have developed over the centuries. The modern equivalent to the sort of participatory decision-making processes used by the early sangha and encouraged by Bhante for use in the FWBO/Triratna is *consensus*.

> ***"I think consensus is such a practically important organisational expression of the love mode versus the power mode, and crucial that people in the order understand it, or we'll degenerate into a power structure…. Consensus matters when we're trying to get alignment between people who have different opinions on matters that they have legitimate responsibility for…"***
>
> **Dhammarati**

Whilst consensus may well have its roots in historic decision-making processes, the form of it that we know and practice today largely grew out of the counterculture movement of the 1960s. (Wiki reports virtually no literary references to *consensus decision-making* before this time.)

Consensus seems to be generally acknowledged and accepted as **one** of the principal ways in which we make decisions within Triratna but how and when it is most appropriately practised is less clear.

There are several ways of approaching consensus. Some are idealistic in their aspirations, some aim for pragmatism, and others exist somewhere between these two extremes:

Idealistic process — Pragmatic process

1. Consensus—----------2. Consensus -1 —----------3. Consensual (consent)

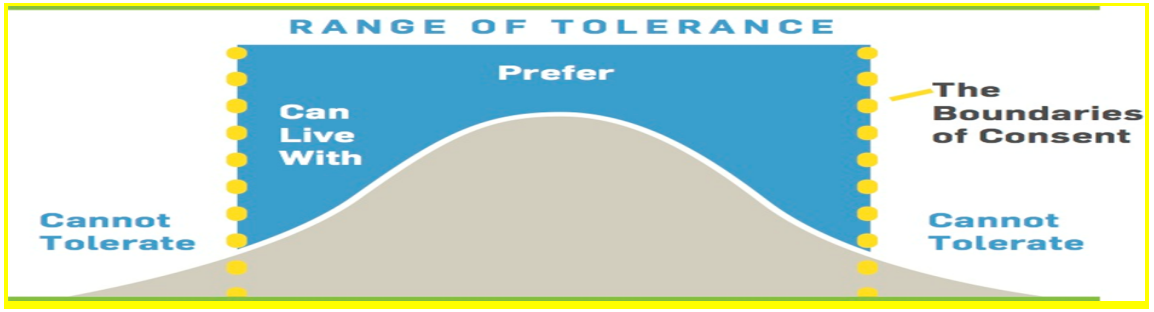
Consensus decision-making requires the active, positive and affirmative agreement of everyone involved in the decision. A consensus decision means *we are all of the same opinion* which is obviously an ideal outcome. However, this process creates the potential for a 'tyranny of the minority' whereby any decision reflecting the will of the majority can be easily blocked by a single person or a small number of people.

Consensus -1 is similar to consensus above but is designed to mitigate the risk of 'tyranny of the minority'. Consensus -1 means *we are all of the same opinion except one member or party.* When this happens the dissenting member or party is responsible for finding and proposing an alternative solution that all members or parties will agree to. If this is not achieved within a specified (reasonable) time frame

the original decision is carried. (See Appendix below for an example of how consensus -1 is applied at the Glasgow Buddhist Centre.)

Consensual decision-making is a pragmatic approach taken from, among other sources, 'sociocratic' models of organisation and governance (see iii below). It seeks consent which simply means *nobody objects.* Having 'no objection' does not mean that everybody thinks that this is the best solution possible but they accept it as 'good enough' to be implemented.

To give an idea of what is involved in consensual decision-making the notion of a 'range of tolerance' is an important concept within this model, is illustrated below:



A practical approach to this way of working in real world situations is to gauge the degree of consent of those included in the decision-making by using the following *Gradients of Agreement Scale* which can be broken down and labelled in a variety of ways:

1. **Strongly agree** - I feel this proposal must be accepted as a matter of principle.
2. **Agree** - The decision is perfectly acceptable.
3. **Provisionally agree** - It's not perfect, but I can live with this.
4. **No strong feelings/abstain** - I'm willing to defer to the wisdom of the group.
5. **Stand aside** - I don't support this but will not block it.
6. **Block** - I strongly disagree and must block it as a matter of principle

The *Gradients of Agreement Scale* can be used to elicit a full and nuanced picture of the level of support for any proposal and gives a sound basis for establishing whether the support for the proposal was: enthusiastic, strong, lukewarm, ambiguous, or meagre.

Positions 1 and 6 indicate that the proposal under discussion is a matter of principle for the individuals concerned. The other participants in the decision-making process can of course override this but effectively this would mean a parting of the ways. Obviously, either the taking of this position (1 or 6) or overriding it should be a matter of great concern and all attempts should be made to find some sort of mutually agreeable solution before this happens.

If there were individuals positioned either at 1, 5 or 6 on the agreement scale their reasons would be engaged with and carefully checked out. Those who differ and dissent may have important contributions to offer a community's self-understanding so it is well worth paying attention. Sometimes further discussion and modification of the proposal can bring those at 6 to at least 5 on the scale which

strengthens the agreement.

7). Participation in decision-making

Unlike the traditional sangha, it is not practical, or even desirable, to involve everyone in every decision. Therefore, it is important that there is common understanding and agreement regarding the boundaries of participation for decision-making processes and on what bases.

In most instances this is worked out and well established. For example, a centre council elected by the members has decision-making authority within its defined sphere of responsibilities. These responsibilities are clear and so are the boundaries of participation as described in 'What is a Triratna Centre'.

8). Including voices at the edge of the mandala

Every Mandala has a centre, but it also has an edge. Although the 'ideal' of consensus may not always be a practicable approach to decision-making in the complexity of today's Triratna, the Buddhist principles that inform it are still relevant. Consequently, voices at the edge of the mandala - voices that express unpopular minority perspectives or dissent - need to be heard and acknowledged. They may have something important to contribute that could influence a change of mind.

9). The skilful and unskilful expression of dissent

Just as there are skilful and unskilful ways of exercising responsibility and decision-making authority, there are also skilful and unskilful ways of expressing opposition and dissent to decisions.

It is incumbent upon those who oppose a decision to express their dissent ethically in accordance with the 'love mode'. In practice, this means seeking to be heard and acknowledged by those with the decision-making responsibility and authority. Once this has been achieved, it is for the responsibility-holders (and them alone) to determine what course of action they will take in response. If they decide to continue with their original decision then those who oppose it, having exhausted their options, have little choice but to accept and make peace with this. They must not resort to the 'power mode' in an effort to undermine or overturn what they do not like.

10). The role of consultation in decision making

Regardless of which decision-making process is used, it is often helpful, and sometimes essential, to consult with those likely to be affected.

There are different ways to consult and it is important that those being consulted fully understand the exact nature of what they are participating in and the extent to which they are (or are not) involved in the decision making process.

1. **Co-creation** means those involved in the consultation are involved in the decision making process

2. **Open consultation** means that you are inviting suggestions and ideas which may (or may not) be developed into proposals.

3. **Consulting on a proposal** means that a general proposal exists and you're inviting feedback to test its acceptability or find ways of further developing it.

4. **Proposal** means there is a specific, well worked out proposal and explicit acceptance (or blessings) for its adoption are being sought.

Further information:

i. Previous attempts to address the issue of decision-making within Triratna:
https://thebuddhistcentre.com/resources/decision-making-process-and-consensus

ii. Authority and the Individual in the New Society
https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/read?num=138&p=6

iii. Information about sociocracy:
https://medium.com/@Harri_Kaloudis/a-brief-introduction-to-sociocracy-a0770f220937

iv. What is a Triratna Centre?
https://internationalcouncil.online/wp-content/uploads/sites/138/2022/07/what_is_a_triratna_centre.pdf

v. General background information about consensus decision-making:
Consensus decision-making - Wikipedia (available in several languages)

APPENDIX: **Glasgow Buddhist Centre's Consensus decision-making policy**

The basis of all our actions in the spiritual community are guided by the precepts, the desire to act from non-harm. For example, the positive speech precepts of truthfulness, kindness, helpfulness and harmony show us how we can use our speech to create a rich and connected community together. These values form the basis of the process of consensus decision making. When we listen, and trust in the process of building consensus, we build a healthy, strong and connected community together.

This policy makes clear what we mean in the Glasgow Buddhist Centre when we say we make decisions on the basis of consensus.

Consensus is defined as general agreement, rooted in a spirit of like-mindedness, concord and solidarity. Our consensus decision making process helps us get to a place where we can all get behind the decisions we make. It is rooted in the precepts, and metta, which can be defined as solidarity with all beings. It does not mean that every decision we consent to is our first choice but that we can choose to cooperate with the direction of the group, rather than insist on our personal preference.

Glasgow Buddhist Centre's consensus model

All decisions will be reached by consensus, using the decision rule of consensus minus one*. We use this rule after as full and thorough a conversation as is necessary for the particular decision to be reached.

Consensus means that we have worked to hear all the voices in the room, and that if there is a difference of opinion that we have thoroughly interrogated all the views and opinions and thoughts present in the room, and worked toward a shared understanding. Using the following levels of consent we assess the level of agreement/consent to the proposal. People are asked which of the following levels best describes their present response:

Level 1 - I agree with the proposal/decision.

Level 2 - I can live with the decision. I am not enthusiastic about it, but I trust the wisdom of the group.

Level 3 - I have concerns but am able to stand aside and go with the collective wisdom.

Level 4 - I'm not ready to make a decision yet, I think we need to to explore more options/ ideas.

Level 5 - I do not fully agree with the decision and feel the need to stand in the way of it being implemented.

If, after testing for initial agreement to any proposal, there is a wide range of responses then we keep dialoguing to see where any stronger agreement might lie. We explore what parts of the proposal do have the support of those in the room. For those who don't agree, we find out what alternatives we can generate together for any areas of non agreement that might work better for all.

If after all the exploration and testing we go around the whole group again, there is only one person that is either a level 4 or a 5, then the decision can be said to have consensus (consensus minus one). It could be implemented as agreed.

However, at this stage, we recommend that the group then explore more with the person who is at a level 4, or 5. We investigate the principles or values that are held in their objections. Can this person suggest an alternative proposal that would meet those values and have the support of others in the decision?

If after this stage there is still only one person not in agreement, then the proposal can still go forward..

According to the the Glasgow Buddhist Centre (Triratna Glasgow) Constitution, all decisions in kulas and the charity's meetings shall be made by consensus. Should our model of consensus prove to be impossible to achieve within a reasonable time, and only as a last resort, the decision shall be made by majority vote, with the **mandate holder/ chair having the casting vote in the event of a tie.

* Consensus minus one means that there is general consensus, and that no decision can be stopped by the disagreement of one person

** where there are joint mandate holders then only one is given the casting vote power.

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