

International Chairs Course – week 1 – *What is a Chair?*

By Jnanadhara, International Movement Coordinator

These notes are rough only and intended to accompany the video of the session which you'll find on YouTube [here](#).

Introduction to the Course

Why have an *International Chairs Course*?

Chairing a centre is a particular role / function in the life of our Order

→ I want to **clarify what that role is**

what is a chair? what do they do – what do *you* do? – that no one else does?

focus on the spiritual aspect of role

take that seriously

not so much on the practical functions

though you can't completely separate the two

The role comes with particular challenges

and it comes with particular opportunities for spiritual growth

that you don't experience in the ordinary course of life as an Order member

→ **to identify those particular challenges & opportunities**

so we can understand them better

have some strategies for

addressing the challenges

making the most of the spiritual opportunities

which are considerable

In order that we can be more effective as chair

And so that we can be more confident in what we are doing

It's a difficult job

→ to create an environment where we can *support* each other

an environment where we can talk with people who understand what we are trying to do

who understand:

the challenges & issues that arise

the complexity of the task

A lot of new chairs in the movement at present

2 in 5 of us here present have been doing it for less than a year

not sure if there are more new chairs than normal, but there might be

those of us that are more experienced can help those less experienced

I spent 12 years as chair of Dublin Buddhist Centre

European Chairs Assembly was invaluable

there are meetings in other Areas

India, Latin America, Oceania, US & Canada

not everyone is able to attend meetings like that

because of distance and other factors

I wanted to create an environment where all could experience this

all over the Triratna world

→ big part of that support is **sharing inspiration**

sharing enthusiasm for doing this work

one of the selfish reasons I really wanted to do the *International Movement Coordinator* role when it came up

→ centre chairs are some of the most inspired Order members and being with them is inspiring!

→ To bring Centre Chairs together Internationally

we don't have a way to do that at present for the Movement

have order conventions for the Order Strand

College meetings for the College Strand

don't have anything equivalent for the Movement – centres, communities, businesses and other enterprises

so we can know and feel our common commitment

reflect on our common task

develop a network of communication

part of what I am trying to do in my role – *International Movement Coordinator*:

→ build a movement strand

very special

coming together internationally highlights what is most essential about Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

can't rely on shared experience on the relatively superficial level

have to go to the deepest level

did this course last year

some refinements

extra week

spread one week's session over two weeks

I'll be looking for feedback

feel free to write to me anytime

with questions that might arise

formally asking at the end of the course

I'm planning on doing other international movement events

based on what is needed

next year I'm planning a brand-new course

perhaps on 6 Paramitas

Part of what we are going to be doing each week is meeting in small groups

not everyone able to come to every week

for those that can come every week we'll meet with the same people

build up connections

if you can't come each week the groups will be more random

plenty of time for discussion

for sharing experience and perspectives

we'll get to meet our small group in a moment

before we do just a few practical matters to mention

opportunity to reflect on the role of chair

your centre

outside of these sessions

6 weeks exploration

→ might like to get a Journal

write down reflections in it

keep it handy - jot things down in it

There will be a video of each session available

can catch up if you miss a session

there will be an email each week

link to video

same Youtube play list

No charge for the course

role paid for by FDF, ECA, Windhorse Trust

3 years funding

2 years in at this point

at some point movement needs to look after itself

Finally,

I recognise there are different ways of being the chair of a centre

I've noticed over the years

some lead from the front

some lead from behind

some lead primarily by Dharma teaching

some lead primarily through friendship

others lead primarily through facilitating process

Also recognise that each of our situations will be different

some large centres – a lot of order members

some small centres – very few or no other local order members

wider culture will be different

some of us will work full time for our Centre

some will have another job

etc

there are some principles which are fundamental and apply everywhere

I'll be focussing on those

forgive me if I say something that doesn't apply in your situation

we have to find our own way in

our character

our situation

its necessarily a creative process

can't be just off the peg

we will each be inspired by different symbols, myths, stories, different aspects of the Dharma

for me - key inspiration for work at Dublin Buddhist Centre was the story of the establishment by Padmasambhava of Buddhism in Tibet

construction of Samye monastery

working with deep forces

the Nagas

for you it might be something different

Building a Buddhaland

Indian friends - continuing the Dhamma Revolution that Dr Ambedkar initiated

couple of minutes to reflect on what is your inspiration / motivation for your work

you might feel out of touch with it at the moment

space where you can talk about that

Why do you do it?

Meet now in small groups

share our inspiration

Questions:

Q. your name, and a little bit about your centre

Q. what inspires you to be chair of your centre?

What is a Centre Chair?

We first need to understand what a chair is

understand the particular task that a chair undertakes

Q. what does a chair do that other order members don't do?

I asked Surata about this during a walk at Padmaloka

I was thinking about becoming chair of the Dublin Buddhist Centre

what does a chair do?

Answer he gave is obvious:

→ the Chair chairs council meetings

But *why do we have a council?*

you might call it something different in your situation:

‘management committee’, ‘board’, ‘trustee body’

group of order members responsible for running the activities of your Buddhist Centre

for ease I’m going to use the term – ‘council’

need to go back a bit to answer that question

We hear about the Dharma, meet a Buddhist, read a book, see a YouTube clip

something touches us

something that feels as if it comes from somewhere else

somewhere untouched by the up and downs of life

‘unconditioned’ / ‘transcendent’

embodied by the Three Jewels

we commit ourselves to that

we pursue it

we step onto the path

we Go for Refuge to Three Jewels

This Going for Refuge brings us into relationship with others who are Going for Refuge

Sangha comes into being

Sangha of committed Buddhists like our Order has been described by Bhante ‘coincidence of wills’

different individuals independently come to hold the same ideals / values

share the same commitment

‘like-minded’

in the sense of like-minded about fundamental matters

e.g. potential in human life for developing aware ness which leads to Awakening

there may be disagreement about relatively trivial matters

we share this deep affinity

& commonality of vision and practice

with no coercion or force

each person participates of their own volition

we freely associate

‘In essence, a spiritual community is a free association of individuals’.

What is the Sangha? p 55

‘spiritual community’ is a unique and precious thing

Sangha

a *context* for our Going for Refuge

also a *context* for the *expression* of our Going for Refuge

the primary expression of Going for Refuge is love / metta

Going for Refuge, or commitment to the Three Jewels, is one's life-blood as a Buddhist. Observance of the Precepts represents the circulation of that blood through every fibre of one's being.

from 'The Ten Pillars' - The Ten Precepts Collectively, 1 The Relation Between Refuges & Precepts

first precept – the most fundamental precept and most fundamental expression of our Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

metta / love – unfolds as compassion / karuna when it meets suffering

and what a lot of it there is

we look around the world and we see suffering

we see people who could benefit from the Three Jewels

potential that is not being realised

a world needs to be transformed

we want to *do* something

individual by individual

we want to express the altruistic dimension of our Going for Refuge

we know that we *can* do something

integral aspect of our ordination:

for the benefit of all beings I accept this ordination

the most effective way of doing that is with others who share our commitment

other members of our Spiritual Community – the Triratna Buddhist Order

for many of us something that we will have been participating in right from the outset of our involvement in Triratna

→ collective endeavour

Needs some shape – institutions to support this activity

→ a Buddhist centre

Instrumental value – to help people

→ needs people to take responsibility for its running

In essence this is what a Buddhist Centre Council is

to answer my question – *Why do we have a council?*

→ a group of order members who come together to help others meet the Three Jewels, to go deeper with them, through the vehicle of a Buddhist centre

an expression of metta

circulation of the life-blood of our Going for Refuge

→ how are we going to do that?

to be effective there is a need for co-ordination / co-operation

you and your fellow Order members have this aspiration → *it needs to be made specific*

things need to be done in a *particular* way

something needs to be done

somewhere

somehow

can't do it every way

→ the key function of the chair is to create the conditions for that to happen

bring people together

to enable those conversations to happen

so that decisions can be made

chairing meetings!

Broader than that

move from *coincidence of wills* – to *coincidence of strategy*

strategy = a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim [OED]

general to the particular

e.g. doing this Dharma class, in this particular evening of the week, in this particular way, with these particular people

a whole host of challenges & opportunities arise from that

talk about them in the coming weeks

Course Overview

week 1 Coming together & Sharing inspiration

reconnecting with our own inspiration

looking at three crucial qualities

week 2 Understanding Consensus Decision Making

what is it?

why do we make decisions in this way ?

how is consensus decision making a spiritual practice?

what is the chair's role within consensus decision making?

week 3 Preparing Council Meetings

how to prepare an agenda

how to usefully reflect on the topics for discussion

preparing mentally for council meetings

week 4 Chairing Council Meetings

how to present topics for discussion

chairing discussion

presenting & modifying proposals

testing for consensus

week 5 The Wider Context

understanding the different levels at which council meetings happen: outer, inner, secret

understanding the chairs function in relation to the local Sangha

working creatively with criticism

developing commonality of practice and strategy beyond the centre council

week 6 Being Chair as Insight Practice

looking at the 3 Marks of Conditioned Existence

Key qualities

I'm talking about spiritual qualities

they relate explicitly to the Dharma

it's not a job, or a role, in the ordinary sense

it's a spiritual responsibility

→ love, clarity, determination

Love

...no mere flabby sentiment but the vigorous expression of an imaginative identification with other living beings.

from Ten Pillars

love for whom?

for the people you want to help

people who could come along

for the people that are doing the helping

your fellow Order members

and Mitras

need environments to grow and develop

who you are working with

you set the atmosphere for your Sangha

at the core

create context where people can become friends

a touchstone for everything that you do

if what you are doing is not an expression of metta then what is it?

Self-aggrandisement?

Q. who is this helping?

you will encounter difficulty

friends might become difficult!

you will not be successful if you don't have this

so gratifying to see people grow

respond to the Dharma

clarity

What you are trying to do and how you might do it

going back to the Dharma again and again and again

in particular Bhante's presentation of it

what does are the principles and what do they mean in this particular situation?

keep enlarging your perspective

determination / energy

energy in pursuit of the good

good for self & good for the world

interrelation

might be coming from one side or the other

kusala – the skilful

not just energy in a general sense

not just good in a general sense

also, continuity of purpose

decide on a particular strategy

staying true to strategy

remember what it is and why you are doing it

particular responsibility of the chair

Avalokiteshvara

1000 armed, 11 headed symbol for our order

Manjughosha

Vajrapani

three family protectors

none of these are fixed and final

commitment to an ongoing *process*

something transcendental

Bodhicitta

can't do it only as yourself

heroic qualities

The Bodhisattvas at the Ajanta caves

refinement *and* power

The course opportunity to reflect on your role and chair

opportunity to reflect on your centre

Questions:

1 how would you like to grow spiritually through being chair?

might be in relation to those three qualities

2 do you have a particular aspiration for the growth of your centre? Is there something in particular that you'd like to see happen?

3 can you see a connection between the two?