

## International Chairs Course – week 5 – *The Wider Context*

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

### The Wider Context

so far the course has been focussed on the council

the heart of the local Sangha

& chairing meetings of the council

the characteristic function of the chair

however you are not only chair of the council

you are chair *of the centre / Sangha*

that puts you in a particular relationship to all members of the local Sangha

A collective of whatever kind seems to require a focal point embodied in a particular person

The same in a spiritual movement like ours:

highest level → Buddha

intermediate level → Bhante

crystallised a particular approach to Dharma practice which has become the focus for our Community

local situation → chair

not necessarily in a vertical position spiritually speaking

Sometimes in our movement we have co-chairing arrangements

2, 3 or 4 people

only seems to work as interim measure

I'm not aware of situations where this kind of arrangement has endured effectively & happily

I don't fully understand this

it is what seems to happen

dynamics in communication emerge *that weren't there before*

that person becomes a nexus for communication

we need to acknowledge the reality of this and accept it

handover ceremony

this whatever-it-is is represented by an object

a symbol of the office

old chair puts it down and the new chair picks it up

Subhadramati telling me about Suryagupta becoming the chair of the LBC

asked Bhante to bless a khatvanga

Padmasambhava's tantric staff

***Bhante's words when he gave me [Subhadramati] the Khatvanga as symbol for the Chair of the LBC in March 2016, just before Suryagupta became Chair.***

*'The Staff hopefully will be handed down to Chairs for hundreds of years. Subhuti has written a paper outlining the responsibilities of a public preceptor. But the responsibilities of a Chair are even more because a Chair has to draw all the threads together. [Bhante emphasized that, making a movement with his hands]. And it's important that the Chair personally [again, Bhante emphasized that] gets to know everyone at the Centre; not just seeing them in meetings.'*

*'getting to know'*

What does it mean?

Does it mean friendship?

What is the depth of relationship we are looking to have with Sangha members?

daunting?

Can discuss in groups

*'draw the threads together'*

= coincidence of strategy

three doors through which we act: Body, Speech, & Mind

establishing relationships

getting to know people

*'draw the threads together'*

## **Body**

'It is a virtue to be ornamental as well as useful.'

*from Wisdom Beyond Words*

### **simply (1) be physically present**

the was difficult stuff when I started working at the Dublin Buddhist Centre

not place to go into this

I wasn't chair

I was *'the closest thing we have to a chair'*

I was chairing the meetings

ambiguity

I didn't know how to resolve things

nobody else did either!

all I could do was just be there

a constant

act of faith

faith that the clouds would clear

which they eventually did!

just being there served a useful – perhaps essential – function

### **(2) Be More Ceremonious**

another of Bhante's 15 points

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ1p3gBmQH8>

honouring Inner level & secret level

Not only in times of difficulty

also in times of celebration

the fact that you are there invests the occasion it with a heightened significance

officiating at Mitra ceremonies

it indicates to everyone that it is important

I learnt this lesson the hard way

Buddha Day when I was first chair

hardly anybody there

felt embarrassed

I had a not very good excuse for not being there

not a personal ego trip

it can be!

ask your friends

Bhante *'I don't want the FWBO to be Sangharakshita writ large.'*

don't want local centre to be you writ large

about seeing what the situation needs

someone needs to respond

sometimes that person is you and it can only be you

e.g.

introducing a guest Order member

communicate an important decision from the council to the Sangha

have a difficult conversation

when it's clear that it's your responsibility in a way it's easy

you just do your best, that will be enough

surrender your preference

All this means that we will **(3) be visible**

show our face

One reason that we can avoid being visible is we want to avoid criticism

being chair - '*a lightning rod for criticism*'

when I was asking chairs about what they would like covered in the course this featured quite highly

responding creatively to criticism – to *blame*

deep instinct

we don't want to stand out from the crowd

safety in numbers

primal

deeply frightening

some people have this more or less

me being a gay person

come to the conclusion that everyone has it to some extent

Dhammapada - Chapter on Anger

*227 This is an old story, Atula, not just one of today.  
They blame him who is taciturn [someone who doesn't speak a lot];  
they blame him who is talkative;  
they even blame him who speaks in moderation.  
There is no one in the world who is not blamed.*

*228 There has not been, nor will there be,  
nor is there anyone now,  
who is absolutely blamed or absolutely praised.*

(Atula was a layman who blamed various bhikkhus in the ways mentioned by the Buddha)

## **Working with Criticism / Blame**

### **1. recognise it as fact of life**

nothing has gone wrong

opportunity to get to grips this

Dhammapada quote - past, present and future

let go of an unrealistic need to be treated fairly

liberating to face the fear

## 2. metta

simile of the two-handed saw

*Monks, even if bandits were to savagely sever you, limb by limb, with a double-handed saw, even then, whoever of you harbours ill will at heart would not be upholding my Teaching.*

without this opportunity how would you practice patience?

Shantideva – Bodhicaryavatara - without a beggar how could you practice generosity

That difficult Sangha member is a Bodhisattva sent by the Buddha's to teach me patience – *kshanti*

## 3. stand in right view

be clear about what is skilful course of action is

what the right thing is to do

not concerned so much about what will be popular

what will make people like you

Often – usually – it will not be possible to make a decision that will please everyone

accept this otherwise you might make weak / compromised decisions

develop individuality

one of the opportunities of the role – develop confidence

you have the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as a Refuge

what could be a surer basis for confidence than that?

## 4. be aware that **it may not be about you**

Sometimes whatever people are unhappy about with the Centre, Sangha, with Bhante, with Triratna as a whole

its put on you

you represent something for others

you might become a stand in for someone else

e.g. the order, older broth

'This has got nothing to do with be *personally*'

Crazy to take it personally

**5. if you've done something wrong admit it**

→ and apologise

relinquish the expectation that the other person will do the same!

**6. 'next time it will be praise'**

Bhante's method

'*next time it'll be criticism*'

The worldly winds

**7. opportunity to develop self-knowledge**

criticism can be helpful

in fact its invaluable

we need it to grow

even if it unreasonable / given disproportionate weight

opportunity to learn something about yourself

Surata - if you question the accuracy / objectivity of criticism

ask three friends for a second opinion

if all three agree you need to take it on

*ask* people for feedback

exemplify

makes it easier if people have something difficult to say

*real* mark of spiritual development: how are you when you are criticised?

Being chair also makes you a lightning rod for *appreciation*

when I was finishing up as chair

a lot of the appreciation expressed as appreciation for *me* was really appreciation for the centre more generally and the centre team more specifically

learn to accept it!

You can learn a lot from appreciation and rejoicing too

## Speech

### 1. what you say as chair carries extra weight

more potent

can be alarming!

works both ways

for good or for ill

might not be able to think out loud anymore

e.g. *'Inanadhara thinks x'*

next points follow from this:

### 2. acknowledge when you make a mistake

apologise when necessary

go out of your way

*'yeah, I got that wrong, sorry'*

e.g.

Putting add in newsletter looking for extras for *Vikings*

Tibetan looking people

Vajrashura so relieved

I *volunteered* it and apologized

people will trust you more if you do this

*trust* is your principle basis for effectiveness

### 3. rejoice in merits

in people's efforts



can't think in the normal way

they didn't do it *for you*

be careful about setting oneself up as the arbiter of value

dishing out praise

however people need to know that what they are doing makes a difference

that it has been noticed

sometimes need to rejoice for everyone

not everyone can speak

talk about people behind their backs!

their spiritual qualities

## **Mind**

### **1 really think things through**

what you say will have significant shaping influence

need to understand the situation deeply

need to understand the Dharma deeply

impetus to study and practice

impetus to *make up your mind*

ask - why do we do it like this?

keep *re*-discovering the Dharma

Bhante's approach just keeps opening out for me

Upekshamati – on Newsreel – *'it makes sense'*

propels you

not just about you

success in your sadhana

Chatrul Rinpoche

## Questions

Q. How do you think of your relation to the people in your Sangha? Is it friendship you are offering or something else?

Q. How do you feel about being visible in your local Sangha?

Q. Have you been criticized while you have been chair? If so how have you worked with it?

Q. Has being chair changed your attitude to the more 'individual' aspects of Dharma practice? e.g. meditation & study

## Achieving Coincidence of Strategy Beyond the Council

**not just discussing strategy but enacting it / *doing* things together** - working together

Dharma moves from principle into practice

when it really matters

one finds out what one really thinks & feels

abstract to concrete

there will be friction

people learn in the doing

frustrating meetings is when the learning is happening

not just on retreat and in study groups or meditation

clash of egotism!

We know where we *really* are

see how other people do things

learn by observation

Going for Refuge is an *act*

Not merely an idea

There is a creative interplay between

having a clear Dharmic focus and direction embodied in a specific strategy, and

effort to bring individuals along with the strategy so that it can be an expression of *their* commitment.

→ focus / effectiveness sacrificed on the altar of inclusion

Tends to happen that way around

→ inclusion sacrificed on the altar of focus / effectiveness

*'Weaving the threads together'*