

Guidelines on Buddhist Social Action

Central to the Triratna Community from its inception has been an understanding that the transformation of the world is inseparable from the transformation of the self. Buddhist social action is not a substitute for more formal Buddhist practice but rather arises out of the wisdom and compassion generated by it.

In his talk 'Evolution or Extinction: Current World Problems' (1971) Sangharakshita states that every thinking human being should do these four things to help the world:

- i. develop oneself;
- ii. join a spiritual community;
- iii. withdraw support from groups that discourage, directly or indirectly, the development of the individual; and
- iv. exert whatever good one can in the groups to which one unavoidably belongs.

Most of us have heeded Sangharakshita's advice, and some want to do more.

For the purpose of these International Council Guidelines, the term social action refers specifically to actions intended to have a positive impact on the world beyond the more explicitly Dharmic activities of the Triratna Buddhist community. It seeks to address local and global issues that cause suffering. It can include raising awareness of such issues, encouraging the ethical conduct of individuals in wider society, promoting ethical policy in public and private institutions, advocating for systemic change, and improving the wellbeing of specific populations. Here, the term 'Buddhist social action' is used when these sorts of activities are explicitly motivated and informed by the Dharma.

Triratna's close association with Dr. Ambedkar, who is included on the Triratna Tree of Refuge and Respect, underlines the above understanding of Buddhist social action. This is especially alive in India, where social action has always been an integral aspect of Triratna's activities. However, there are different views about the place of Buddhist social action in Triratna (especially outside India) and how to do it well. Sometimes emotions run high and disagreements about the most appropriate response to social issues results in disharmony. With this in mind, the International Council has created and agreed, the following guidelines to assist individuals and the governing bodies of

Triratna institutions navigate this territory as skilfully as possible.

Please note that the guidelines are comprehensive but not exhaustive. They are likely to be most useful when considered in relation to each other rather than as discrete points in isolation.

1. Triratna's primary response to the suffering of the world is to communicate the Dharma

Enlightenment is the deepest, most complete and only effective long-term response to the world's suffering. The Triratna community provides supportive conditions that encourage individual and collective transformation in accordance with this vision. We need to make a consistent effort to ground all of our activities in Dharmic principles.

2. Buddhist social action emanates from compassion for all beings

Despite the unfathomable scope of worldly suffering, our intention is to help alleviate it. When dedicating ourselves to the welfare of a specific group, we aim to maintain compassion for everyone involved - including those who we might perceive as oppressors or perpetrators of harm.

3. As Buddhists we will sometimes find it necessary to take action in response to specific ethical issues

Both as individuals and as Triratna institutions, we will sometimes find it necessary to take action in response to specific ethical issues that others may perceive as social or political. It is also worth noting that wilful inaction (ie. doing nothing) will have its own ethical consequences.

4. We encourage social action from a distinctly Buddhist perspective

Creating positive change in our local communities and the world can be a meaningful expression of Buddhist practice. We encourage sangha members to expand their field of empathy, including receptivity to difficulties beyond their personal experience, and to find effective ways to respond rooted in, and expressive of, wisdom and compassion. If some local sangha members wish to respond collectively in alignment with Buddhist principles, and this is supported by the rest of the local sangha (including the Centre's trustees and President), their Centre may be able and willing to support them.

5. Buddhist social action is informed by insight into conditionality (pratitya-samutpada)

A strength of Buddhist social action is its awareness that social issues are complex conditioned phenomena that arise in dependence upon multiple causes. This potentially brings a broad

and nuanced perspective to social issues that discourages polarisation and the sort of simplistic and emotionally charged reactivity that attributes blame to a single cause.

6. The Bodhisattva Ideal finds expression in many different ways

While Buddhist social action can express the Bodhisattva ideal, so can supporting the activities of a Buddhist centre or focussing one's efforts on meditation and retreat-like practices. People will choose different paths, and sometimes choose different paths at different times in their lives.

7. Buddhist social action requires awareness of our own mental states

As with all of our practices, Buddhist social action requires awareness of the motivations, views, and emotions that underlie it, and how engaging in it affects our own mental states. Social issues that bring us into contact with deep suffering can be challenging. Meeting that challenge can be energising but it can also be depleting. Therefore, it is important to have supportive conditions and to uphold a strong aspiration to generate, maintain and act from positive mental states.

8. Buddhist social action unfolds in the context of kalyana mitrata

When we engage in Buddhist social action it is important to do so in communication with others in the sangha - being receptive to the feedback, support, and guidance of our friends as well as being open to dialogue with those who hold different opinions. This is important for the integrity of our spiritual community as a place where we can cultivate informed, individual perspectives and work against the tendency towards group conformity.

9. Triratna institutions should not affiliate - either explicitly or implicitly - with political parties and ideological movements or groups

It can sometimes be helpful to collaborate with, or work alongside, other groupings with whom we share a concern for a common cause. When doing so, it is important not to affiliate or align our sanghas, centres, or other Triratna bodies with them. Even though there may be an overlap of particular views, these groups may incorporate other views or elements that are contrary to the Dharma.

10. Nobody can speak for Triratna as a whole on social issues

When we engage in social action we can not speak for Triratna as a whole. If we wish to express any view or make any public statement on a social issue, we do so as an individual or as part of a clearly named grouping (e.g. a centre council, a chairs' assembly or similar), where everyone involved has given their explicit consent.

11. We encourage a culture where different opinions are expressed and explored harmoniously

Whilst drawing on the same essential Buddhist teachings, committed Buddhists may come to different conclusions on how to address social issues. We encourage a culture where different opinions are expressed and explored in the light of Dharmic principles and where even vigorous discussions are conducted with metta and mutual respect.

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Note 1: Achieving consensus, or even consent, on disputed issues can be challenging. In relation to the creation of the current guidelines, it is worth noting that members of one Area Council initially did not consent to their adoption. Their objection related more to their spirit and emphasis than their substance. They wanted the guidelines to be more overtly and emphatically encouraging of social action. Others, whilst not necessarily opposed to social action per se, felt that such encouragement could potentially detract from Triratna's primary means of addressing the world's suffering which is through sharing the Dharma and creating the conditions for its practice.

Over a period of two years, efforts were made to negotiate a middle way between these emphases. The guidelines published here, which have now been adopted by all six Area Councils, are the result of this process. Inevitably, even in their current form, the guidelines remain more or less encouraging of social action than some members of the International Council would really prefer.

Note 2: Since the International Council agreed this document a significant event took place that highlighted the potential for confusion due to an apparent incongruence between the content of some of the Guidelines and one of our founding principles.

In February 2025 activism began in Bodh Gaya to have the management of the Bodhi Temple transferred to Buddhists. (The management committee being majority Hindu.) This activism is ongoing and is part of the movement to reclaim Bodh Gaya for Buddhism that goes back to the days of Anagarika Dharmapala. This is a significant issue for Buddhists in India and elsewhere, and members of our Order in India were anxious to seize the moment and contribute to this movement for change.

The question for them was how to appropriately support the activism at Bodh Gaya as Buddhists and members of the Triratna Buddhist Order. In order to assist them in their deliberations the Social Action Guidelines were circulated amongst Indian Order Convenors.

What emerged was that certain of the guidelines (points 4 and 10) appear to be incongruent with an important principle of our Order, namely, that no one can speak, or appear to speak, for another Order member or for the Spiritual community as a whole. (Sangharakshita lays this out in his 1979 lecture *Authority and the Individual* in the *New Society* published in *What is the Sangha?* in the chapter heading *Authority*.)

The response to the situation in Bodh Gaya was a petition that Order members and others could sign in an individual capacity.

Given the lengthy and complex process that was undertaken to formulate the Guidelines, the International Council Steering Group didn't think it desirable to attempt to redraft the guidelines in light of this development, given the probable delays to

the release of otherwise useful material contained in them. They recommend that this 'road test' be taken into consideration, and any inadvertent consequences of the present text, when reviewing the Guidelines in future.