



Guidelines for a **Conflict Resolution Process** in Triratna

Triratna International Council

Now at that time monks, causing quarrels, causing strife, falling into disputes... behaved unsuitably towards one another in gesture, in speech; they came to blows. People looked down upon, criticized, spread it about, saying: "How can these recluses, sons of the Shakyans, causing quarrels...come to blows?" Khandhaka, Mahavagga 10.

Harmony is such a fundamental expression of awareness and kindness, that it's of the nature of a spiritual community to resolve conflict, and restore harmony. However, as the account of the *Quarrel at Kosambi* suggests, conflict can happen in any community, including our own. As Vishvapani wrote in a Sangha Day talk, 'Difficulties aren't a sign of failure: they are inevitable and Dharma practice turns on what we make of them...'

At the International Council meeting in 2016, we discussed how to resolve conflict in our Community. In many cases conflicts are already dealt with well in Triratna: through personal practice, within the existing structures, and especially within the informal network of friendships. Inevitably, some conflicts, sometimes the more serious and intractable ones, are not resolved by these informal processes. In those cases, it would be helpful if clearer processes were agreed by our community, and more skilled support available.

Drawing on our discussion on the 2016 International Council Meeting, this document proposed some ways to begin to put those processes in place. It was agreed and adopted at the 2018 International Council meeting at Bhaja.

Summary

Section 1 looks at the *aims* of such a process: to support people to work in their spiritual practice with their own mental states effectively; to help restore harmony between the people affected and the wider community; and to create a culture that supports the resolution of conflict.

Section 2 Drawing on the 'conflict resolution' procedures of the *Vinaya*, Section 2 suggests a process that moves from informal dialogue to something more structured if it's needed, and which can be applied in different kinds of conflict.

Section 3 looks more specifically at what might happen when there is conflict between different centres or Trusts within Triratna.

Section 4 looks at 'creating a culture', and at how conflict might be prevented from arising, as far as possible.

The aim of this document is to suggest clear processes and training when they would be helpful in addressing conflict of different kinds within the Triratna community

Principles and Processes

While our spiritual principles are very clear, sometimes our processes in dealing effectively with conflict in the Sangha are less clearly worked out, and in those cases it would be helpful to draw on specific skills and processes that are in harmony with those values. The approaches proposed here draw from the *Adhikarana Samatha*, the ‘conflict resolution’ procedures of the Vinaya, as well as some more modern approaches to resolving conflict, like Restorative Approaches and NVC, though this proposal is at too early and exploratory a stage to commit to a single method or approach.

The *Adhikarana Samatha*, appropriately in a spiritual community, begin in the natural relationship of *kalyana mitrata*, and gradually become more formal if the situation makes that necessary, aiming for outcomes that are ‘in accordance with Dhamma’. Restorative Practices make a useful distinction which echos the difference between ‘Love mode’ and ‘Power mode’, when they compare Retributive responses on the one hand, which ask, ‘What rule has been broken? Who broke it?’, and ‘What do they deserve?’, and Restorative responses on the other, which ask, ‘Who’s been affected? What do they need?’ and, ‘Whose responsibility is it to meet that need?’.

Aims of the Processes

The aims of the process are:

1. To support people to work effectively with their own mental states, from an ethical and Dhamma perspective, including the practice of confession.
2. To help the parties affected to understand what has happened.
3. To understand, with empathy, the impact on those involved: who has been affected and in what ways?
4. Discover, with those affected, what needs to happen to put things right or to resolve things in the future.
5. To help restore harmony between the people affected, and with the wider community.

and more generally:

6. To create a culture that supports harmony and the effective resolution of conflict, ‘in accordance with Dhamma’
7. To change the wider conditions, where they contribute to the conflict.

Many conflicts and disagreements in Triratna are resolved effectively already, within the informal networks of kalyana mitrata, and the aim would be to help create a culture where people had the skills to do this more and more effectively.

A simple disagreement becomes a 'conflict' needing more attention perhaps, when it is serious enough to create disharmony in a way that affects the individuals or the wider community; when it is protracted; and when the people directly involved have been unable to resolve the disagreement.

There may be some concerns about introducing a more explicit procedure for resolving conflict in Triratna, that such a process might actually encourage disharmony by giving more prominence to complaints and conflict. However, dealing with conflicts and disagreements is already more time consuming and less effective in our community than it could be, and a clearer structure would meet a real need.

In the traditional *Adhikarana Samatha*, a wide range of possible causes for conflict is described, which range from disagreements about points of dharma to concerns about ethical conduct: but the *process* described for addressing all of those conflicts follows the same pattern. Regardless of what has caused a conflict, it seems, similar conditions help to create dialogue and move things towards resolution.

Stage 1: Informal dialogue

The first step in resolving any conflict, where it is possible, is that the people involved get together and to try to sort the issue out between them.

If they can't find a solution agreeable to both of them, then they may nominate someone who they both would trust to help mediate the discussion. At this stage, that person helping in this way might not have any specialist skills or training, but would have the confidence of both parties, and engaging as a kalyana mitra.

Stage 2: Facilitated dialogue

If this informal process does not satisfactorily resolve things, the issue can then be taken to someone who has the experience or the training to work effectively with conflicts.

Who?

A more structured conflict resolution process could be initiated by one or both parties affected by a conflict. This would mean that each situation should have someone who has the responsibility for supporting the resolution of conflict and complaints, and it should be clear how to contact them.

This will be different depending on the context, and whether the conflict or dispute is happening in an Order or a movement context. An issue within a centre, for example, could be referred to the Chair, or someone to whom this responsibility has been delegated. In a conflict between two order members, the appropriate person might be the Order convenors, or the Preceptors of the Order members involved.

The contact person might themselves have the skills to help or, if not, make sure the person or people involved were put in touch with someone who did have the skills. They would talk to the those involved, and other affected parties, to see if a resolution can be found.

Who?

If we need skilled people to help in this way, then we need to make these skills easily accessible in Order and Movement contexts. For example, larger centres could decide to have a trained facilitator locally, and similarly some order convenors in each region could train in working effectively with conflict. Some centre presidents, chairs and other order members are already training in restorative practice and other methods. This would provide a pool of facilitators that smaller and less well resourced situations could draw on.

What?

The facilitator would talk to the individual involved to explore what has happened, how it has affected them and others, and what would be needed to resolve the issue.

With the agreement of all parties, they would talk it through with the person raising the issue and other affected parties, to see what they can do individually or together to find a resolution to the issue.

Stage 3: Formal resolution

Who?

If the issue is still unresolved, the matter would be adjudicated by the body which has formal responsibility. In the movement strand this could mean the trustees of the charity; in an Order context, the Order convenors, or in the case of a serious ethical breach, the private and public preceptors.

What?

They will look at what has already happened and see if any further efforts at dialogue are appropriate. If not, they will decide on the complaint and any action needed, after consulting all parties.

If the complaint is *against* the trustee body, best practice would be to involve someone outside the situation in the resolution of the issue, for example the Centre president, or the Chair of another centre. The trustee body would still have the legal responsibility, however.

Step 4: Legal and Safeguarding Issues

Some conflicts and complaints will involve serious ethical issues, and some of those will have legal as well as ethical implications. For example, 'Safeguarding' obligations apply in England and Wales when an adult or child may be 'at risk'. Similar obligations may apply in other countries.

Even if an ethical issue has a legal aspect, there are levels of possible intervention. Some problems may need to be reported to the police or, in the UK, the Charity Commission (UK). Trustees, and others in positions of responsibility, need to be aware of their responsibilities. In addressing conflicts, reference should always be made to any relevant policies, such as Ethical Guidelines and policies for the protection of children and adults from harm – either Triratna's model documents or local adaptations or equivalents. Those with specialist expertise should be consulted where necessary.

In the UK, this service is provided by the Safeguarding policies and designated Safeguarding officer in every Triratna charity. They work in dialogue with Triratna's Safeguarding team, to whom cases can be referred if needed. Centres in other countries are strongly advised to do the same or similar.

Triratna's 2020 model Ethical guidelines and policies for Safeguarding children and adults can be found **here**.

In the last few years there have been some examples of conflict or disputes between different organisations within Triratna. Though these are perhaps more complex than conflicts between individuals, the same basic steps of a resolution process seem to apply.

Stage 1: Informal dialogue

At this level it would be the responsibility of the Chair of the Trustees of each organisation to initiate dialogue between the two, and to explore ways of resolving a dispute. I'd suggest at this level, if the chairs themselves are involved in the dispute, that it would be useful to involve the Centre Presidents.

The job of the Chair or President at this stage is to find out more about what the issue is, talking it through with the the key people on both sides, exploring options, and seeing if together a solution can be reached.

Stage 2: Facilitated dialogue

Who?

If this does not satisfactorily solve the issue, the issue can then be taken to a facilitator who is not involved in the complaint, and who has the confidence of both parties.

What?

They would talk to the key individuals involved or affected, explore with them what's needed and, if useful, facilitate a more structured dialogue, to find a resolution to the issue.

Stage 3: Formal resolution

In the case of a dispute between two autonomous non-profits, there's no formal legal authority within Triratna above the Trusts themselves.

There are however the Centre Presidents, and bodies that have Order and Movement wide responsibilities, like the Order convenors and the Area and International Councils. Disharmony is such a serious disruption of the Sangha, we suggest that individual Trusts are encouraged to ask for adjudication from those bodies.

What is a Triratna Centre suggests an appeals process, a briefer version of which could be adapted in this situation, but the details of this step would need discussion within the Movement strand.

The Movement in the Area

If the matter can't be resolved by local Trustees, the President should be asked to help. Where there is no President or if no resolution can be found in this way, a next step may be to take the matter to the Area Chairs / Presidents' meeting. If the Chairs' meeting in the Area was reluctant or unable to take on this responsibility for any reason, it may be more appropriate to involve the Area Council.

The Area Council

If the Movement in the Area is not able to resolve the matter, or for any reason chooses not to, the matter can be referred to the Area Council for resolution. Members of the Area Council who are party to the dispute would recuse themselves from a decision.

If the Area council is not in a position to help, the local kula of the Preceptors' College could be involved.

An Appeals Procedure

If either party does not agree with the decision of the Area Council, they can ask that decision is reviewed by the International Council Steering Group, which includes representatives from the Movement, the International Order Convenors, Movement and the Chair and deputies of the Preceptors' College.

Employment and the Order

In recent incidents an Order member has been disciplined or dismissed in ways that have raised the question of the relationship of employer and employee in the Order and movement.

When an Order member (and many of the same issues apply to mitras) is employed by a Trust run by other Order members, two conflicting kinds of relationship are in play: that of employer to employee, which has an element of the 'power' of each party, and that of Order member to Order member, which is a relationship within the Sangha based on metta. In the former, the law and the needs of the Trust govern the relationship and, in the latter, the principles of maitri and Sangha underlie communication. In practice, both aspects need to be taken into account if the institution is to function within the law and within the principles of the Sangha. This needs to be much more carefully thought through than it is in many trusts, and the recent Preceptors' College Commission into issues in some of the Indian Trusts asked the International Council to consider this.

A link to the detailed procedure developed by Windhorse Trust is [here](#).

To engage more effectively with conflict when it arises, in addition to clearer processes, we'd need to improve skills. The most obvious need is for 'facilitators', people with sufficient skills to intervene and help a conflict through to a constructive resolution.

Longer term, the values and skills of this approach to resolving conflicts and disputes need to be embedded more fully in the culture of the Order and movement, which has implications for Order and Ordination training.

Facilitator training

Many order members and mitras are already experienced in creating Sangha, and there are different kinds of training which can add to people's skills in this area. Some situations will have appropriate people already, who are trained or naturally skilled.

However in many situations it's likely that specific training in resolving conflict and disputes will be helpful.

It would be ideal if there was at least one person in the larger situations who had the relevant experience and skill, who could also perhaps support less well resourced Order and Movement situations. The Order Convenors, and regional Movement representatives could keep details of those willing to help in this way.

Wider Cultural Change

Perhaps the most effective way of resolving conflict is to prevent its arising in the first place, and the skills in communication more fully embodied in the Order and Movement.

Training those in positions of responsibility

A one day training in Restorative Approaches to conflict resolution was done by the western Presidents, and the ECA. We'd suggest to make a similar training available to those taking similar responsibility in other Areas.

Ordination training

Our Ordination acceptance verses already commit us to 'Harmony with friends and companions'. Our skills, however, are not always equal to our aspiration. An effective way of increasing communication skills in the Order would be to include it in Ordination training. This could draw on the speech precepts, the mind training verses, confession and on other ways of effectively resolving conflict.

To begin these wider cultural changes, we'd consult with those responsible for Order, Movement and Ordination training in all Areas.

Appendix 1 / Summary of the steps of the process

Roles and responsibilities

Who	Role	Responsibility
Step 0 / Informal kalyanamitra		
Personal kalyanamitra	First of all the people involved in the dispute try to resolve it themselves. If they need support, someone personally known and trusted by the individuals, who has sufficient skills of listening and empathy, is chosen by them.	Dialogue with a 'km', address individual behaviour. To help individual explore what has happened, how has it affected them and others, and what would make a difference.
		To provide support, developing possible options for resolving issues and skilful responses.
		Helping clarify where individual can make positive change, and where they need to be in dialogue, or need support.
Step 2 / Facilitated Dialogue		
Named person, with responsibility for conflict and complaints	Acting on behalf of those responsible for the situation, to find out more about the complaint, resolve if possible, and advise individuals and Trustees on next steps.	Find out more about complaint.
	Some experience and skill facilitating conflict	Work with the individual to resolve the issue, talking it through with them and the other affected parties
		Advise Trustees on next steps, referring to facilitator if necessary
Trained facilitator	independent perspective, and experience of facilitating dialogue. Someone who has a specific training in working effectively with conflict resolution.	The facilitator would talk to the individuals involved to explore what has happened, how it has affected them and others, and what would be needed to resolve the issue.
		Talk it through, with consent, with other affected parties, to find a resolution together.
		Advise Trustees on next steps, and on any wider changes necessary
Step 3 / Formal Resolution		
Trustees / Order Convenors Depending on context	Formal and/or legal responsibility for the situation	Look at what has happened and see if further dialogue would be appropriate.
		If not, they will decide on the complaint and any action needed, after consulting all parties.