

## A short history of the Croydon Centre.

### **Founding**

The Croydon Buddhist Centre was one of the first Centres set up by Triratna (then known as the FWBO, or Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) in the mid 1970s. Since 1968 a small community of Buddhists had been living in Purley and they decided to set up a Buddhist Centre to spread the Buddha's teaching more widely.

In 1981 the Centre moved to our current premises at 96-98 High Street. This building included a wholefood shop and Hockneys, a very successful vegetarian restaurant. As these businesses made money it was possible to set up an arts centre in the building in 1984. This became a popular venue for many different internationally known performers and speakers. The Buddhist Centre was also able to buy Rivendell Retreat Centre in Sussex, which we still own.

### **Troubled Times**

In those days, most of those closely involved in the Centre were in their late teens, twenties, or early thirties. Buddhism was only just becoming established in the West, so most of them were new to Buddhist practice. Intense idealism combined with inexperience, naivety, and unhealthy group dynamics contributed to a painful period in Croydon Buddhist Centre's history.

The pressures of running the Centre grew during the 1980s, and a charismatic leadership demanded long work hours and total commitment from the team. A culture developed informed by the idea of 'fierce friendship' - sometimes including strong personal criticism - as a spiritual practice. Loyalty was expected by an inner circle and wishing to leave was tantamount to letting the side down. There was also an excessive separation of genders within the Centre, and contact between men and women was often discouraged.

By late 80s, people were starting to speak out. Those in central leadership roles within Triratna had become increasingly concerned by what was happening in Croydon and tried to influence it from without, as well as supporting the Croydon-based critics. Then, quite quickly, the group mentality unravelled. The Chair of the Centre resigned from both Triratna and the Croydon Centre. Some other people felt that they had been too badly hurt and left. Most stayed on and worked through painful feelings of shame and betrayal. Someone who was involved at the time tells their story **here**. <http://fwbodiscussion.blogspot.com/2007/02/learning-harsh-way-at-croydon-buddhist.html>

It was realised that the isolation of the Croydon Centre was one of the conditions that allowed these problems to develop. Since then every Triratna Centre has had a

"President", a senior Order member who is not part of the local Centre. Their role is to keep an overview of what is going on within the Centre, supporting and befriending, including looking out for any damaging group dynamics or failure to run the Centre according to Buddhist principles. They also report back to the wider Triratna movement.

### **Sexual Misconduct**

In 1997 the Guardian published an article making many accusations about Triratna and testimonies by three people who had had difficult experiences within Triratna – two of whom had been at the Croydon Buddhist Centre. These included allegations that there had been harmful sexual relations between the former Chair of the Centre and younger men.

The Guardian also reported that Sangharakshita had been encouraging young men into homosexual relationships. There was nothing secret about Sangharakshita's sexual relations and as far as we can tell he had sexual relations with up to 24 adult men in Triratna over a period of 17 years. Though some of those who had sex with him have never seen this as a problem, a few became very unhappy about what had happened.

The criticisms of Sangharakshita caused a good deal of controversy within Triratna and have prompted many years of reflection. We now recognise it is unwise and ethically unskillful for someone in an influential position as a teacher to have sexual relations with potentially impressionable followers. In 2016 Sangharakshita also apologised for any harm or hurt he had caused in the past, and clarified that this included some of his sexual activity.

### **How We Have Responded**

We deeply regret any harm caused to individuals at Croydon Buddhist Centre in the 1980s.

One account of possible illegal activity at the Croydon Centre in the 1980s has been reported by us to the Metropolitan Police and the Charity Commission. Any further such allegations will also be reported. Many of those who have made a historical allegation have also been offered a "Restorative Process". This is a process run by trained people (who are independent of Triratna where necessary) that aims to bring both sides in a dispute together, to speak and hear the truth, and try to find healing.

More information is found **here**.

<https://thebuddhistcentre.com/adhithana-kula/ratnadhara-and-shantigarbha-restorative-process-triratna>

The Croydon Buddhist Centre has also taken active steps to encourage people involved in the 80s to tell their stories and be heard without judgement.

### **Safeguarding Adults and Children in Triratna**

Triratna now has in place a movement-wide system of Safeguarding following UK best practice. Every Centre has its own Safeguarding officer/s, supported with model policies and advice by a central Safeguarding team. Croydon Buddhist Centre's Safeguarding team are:

Prajnanandi (Safeguarding Officer)

Kalyananara (Safeguarding Trustee)

Vajragupta (Centre Chair)

All trustees of the charity, which includes all the Safeguarding team, hold a current Enhanced DBS check certificate. Our current ethical guidelines and policies for Safeguarding adults and children can be found above.

We have a culture of openness about the past. All introductory courses include a mention of the controversies within Triratna and how this affects the Croydon Centre. Triratna has published a **book** which discusses the issues openly, <https://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/the-triratna-story-behind-the-scenes-of-a-new-buddhist-movement/> and you can also **find out more** on Triratna's main website: [<https://thebuddhistcentre.com/controversy>]

We encourage people to talk to the safeguarding team if they have concerns, past or present. Such concerns can be reported in confidence to Prajnanandi using our dedicated Safeguarding email: [croydonsafeguarding@gmail.com](mailto:croydonsafeguarding@gmail.com).

We cannot change the past, but are doing all we can to respond to and learn from it with honesty and integrity. We are committed to dealing with any unskillfulness that arises in the present.

### **Croydon Buddhist Centre Today**

From the 90s onwards, Croydon Buddhist Centre changed radically and began to develop a more mature and healthy culture, including more awareness of the dangers of power dynamics, and so on. Today we offer a safe and inspiring space where many people get a helpful perspective on their life through the teachings of the Buddha, find peace of mind through meditation, and do this in an atmosphere of respect and friendship.

*Posted June 2020 by the Trustees of Triratna Buddhist Community Surrey (the charity that runs Croydon Buddhist Centre)*