

# **How Triratna Works**

being  
a brief guide  
to its mission, size, activities, structure,  
roles, responsibilities,  
and funding

*Updated from Lokabandhu original (2012)  
by Development Team 2019*

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## Introducing Triratna

Triratna is a world-wide Buddhist movement founded in the UK in the late 1960's by Sangharakshita, after he had returned to the UK having spent nearly 20 years in India, many as a Buddhist monk. Originally known as the 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order' (FWBO), it is now active in some 28 countries and the Triratna Buddhist Order (which forms the heart of the Triratna Buddhist Community) numbers over 2000 men and women.

Triratna is highly decentralised, while remaining a strong and united worldwide spiritual community. It's decentralisation means it can be hard for people - even those involved for many years - to have a clear understanding of how it's structured, how decisions are taken, where the money comes from and where it goes to.

This article aims to give a brief and approximate overview of how Triratna works, both its working practices and its operating principles, now that our community is simply too large and widespread for any one person to know everyone or visit everywhere.

### **Triratna's mission**

Triratna's full name is the 'Triratna Buddhist Community', at whose heart is the Triratna Buddhist Order. Open equally to men and women, it exists to help its members and others to deepen their Buddhist practice. It recognises the importance of 'supportive conditions' if an individual's spiritual efforts are to be successful, and therefore of 'spiritual community'. Ultimately Triratna's various institutions and practices only exist to support people in their spiritual lives.

Triratna sees itself as having several distinctive emphases compared to other Buddhist communities: it is ecumenical (ie the whole Buddhist tradition is, in principle, accepted); it is unified (ie membership is open to all, regardless of nationality, race, colour, education, class or caste, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, or age – and to men and women on equal terms); it sees the act of Going for Refuge as central; and it places great value on the importance of spiritual friendship; team-based right livelihood; and the importance of the Arts for spiritual life. All these are reflected to varying degrees in Triratna's organisational structure and practices.

### **Triratna's size and activities**

Triratna was founded in 1967 and both the size of the Order and the numbers of Buddhist Centres have grown steadily since. Its growth has been organic and unplanned, and as a result it is highly diverse, with a very broad spectrum of activities. A founding ideal was to create a 'New Society' supportive to individuals' spiritual lives, and over the years numerous Buddhist and 'Team-Based Right Livelihood' projects (TBRLs) have started in an attempt to spread the Dharma and establish ethical ways for its members to earn a living and support Buddhist projects. Its history is a history of experimentation and adaptation, hopefully learning as it goes.

As a result it uses multiple names, many not actually containing the word 'Triratna'. Since it also has no common logo or 'house style', it's not always easy to recognise a Triratna project! Some of its current trading names around the world are -

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| * the Abhayaratna Trust  | * Bahujan Hitay  |
| * Bodywise               | * Breathing Space                                      |
| * Breathworks            | * Buddhafield  |
| * Clear Vision           | * Dhammakranti   |
| * Dhammaloka             | * EcoDharma  |
| * Free Buddhist Audio    | * GoingOnRetreat.com                                   |
| * Jai Bhim International | * Jambudvipa   |
| * Karuna Trust           | * NNBY (India's National Network<br>of Buddhist Youth) |
| * thebuddhistcentre.com  |  |
| * Windhorse Publications | * Future Dharma  |

Plus it has multiple retreat centres, also not using the name Triratna, each with their own distinctive logos and other branding - making the identification of a 'Triratna' project even harder! Past projects' names include Friends Foods, the Cherry Orchard, Dharma Life, Green Elephant, Hockneys Restaurant, the Dharmapala College, Madhyamavani, TBMSG, and Tipu's Tiger - among many more! Besides 'official' Triratna projects, there are many more informally associated with Triratna - these include Wildmind, Visible Mantra, Buddhist Images, Bodhi Arts and EcoVillage, Crucible Research, and Lotus Realm. Triratna's Buddhist Centres are generally known as 'The XXX Buddhist Centre' - though newer Centres are often called 'The XXX Triratna Buddhist Centre'.

As a public 'brand name', Triratna is therefore somewhat in the background - as indeed 'FWBO' was before the 2010 name change to Triratna. However, people who are part of Triratna have a strong sense of it as being their community. 'Triratna' is not copyrighted and there are at present no formal restrictions on who may or may not use the name.

## **Triratna's organisational structure**

Despite being highly decentralised it has a clear internal structure which has evolved over the years - and which continues to evolve. This can therefore only be a snapshot of the present arrangements.

## **The 'Movement'**

Triratna sees itself as being made up of three autonomous but linked strands - the 'Movement', the 'Order' and the 'College'.

The 'Movement' includes all of Triratna's institutions as mentioned above, plus all the people who work or practice in them. It is open to anyone to join, although there are no membership fees - people join simply by 'getting involved' and starting to practice the Dharma alongside others in the Sangha, to whatever depth or seriousness they choose.

Since it includes multiple charities, trading companies and other legal entities, there are numerous roles and responsibilities to be filled - more of that later. Each legal entity is independent and controlled simply by the people responsible for it: there is no central 'holding company' or head office. An important principle in Triratna is that people holding specific responsibilities must be left free to exercise them.

## **The 'Order'**

The 'Order' is the Triratna Buddhist Order, some 2000 men and women around the world who have individually taken the Dharmachari or Dharmacharini ordination in which they are formally recognised as effectively 'Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels' and accepted into the Order. The Order in turn consists of two more-or-less independent 'wings' - the men's wing and the women's wing, each of which manage their own affairs including their own ordination processes. Triratna is probably unique in having a fully-functioning independent ordination process for women by women - something of which it is very proud.

## **The 'College'**

The 'College' is shorthand for the 'College of Public Preceptors', a much smaller body of around 55 senior Order Members responsible for overseeing the process of ordination around the world and the welfare of those who've been ordained into the Order. They also have final responsibility for Triratna's integrity and continued fidelity to Sangharakshita's teaching - and, when necessary, recognising that it is appropriate for someone to leave the Order. The Public Preceptors perform 'public ordination ceremonies' where people are formally welcomed into the Order; in order to decide when people are ready for ordination they work closely with some 200 'Private Preceptors' who have more personal relationships with those approaching ordination.

## **Triratna's Areas, Regions, and International Council**

All three strands - the 'Movement', 'Order' and 'College' - are world-wide, so Triratna is also, for practical purposes, divided into six 'Areas'. These are intended to be flexible, with new ones emerging as and when necessary. These are:

- Continental Europe
- India
- South Pacific (Australia and New Zealand)
- the Spanish world (Spain and Latin America)
- the UK and Ireland

➤ the United States and Canada

A few Triratna projects already don't fit very well into this - for instance in China, South Africa, Russia, and Turkey - so it is very much a structure in evolution. However the regional approach gives the flexibility to 'do things differently' in different places (while maintaining shared common principles) and to organise regional projects such as translation work.

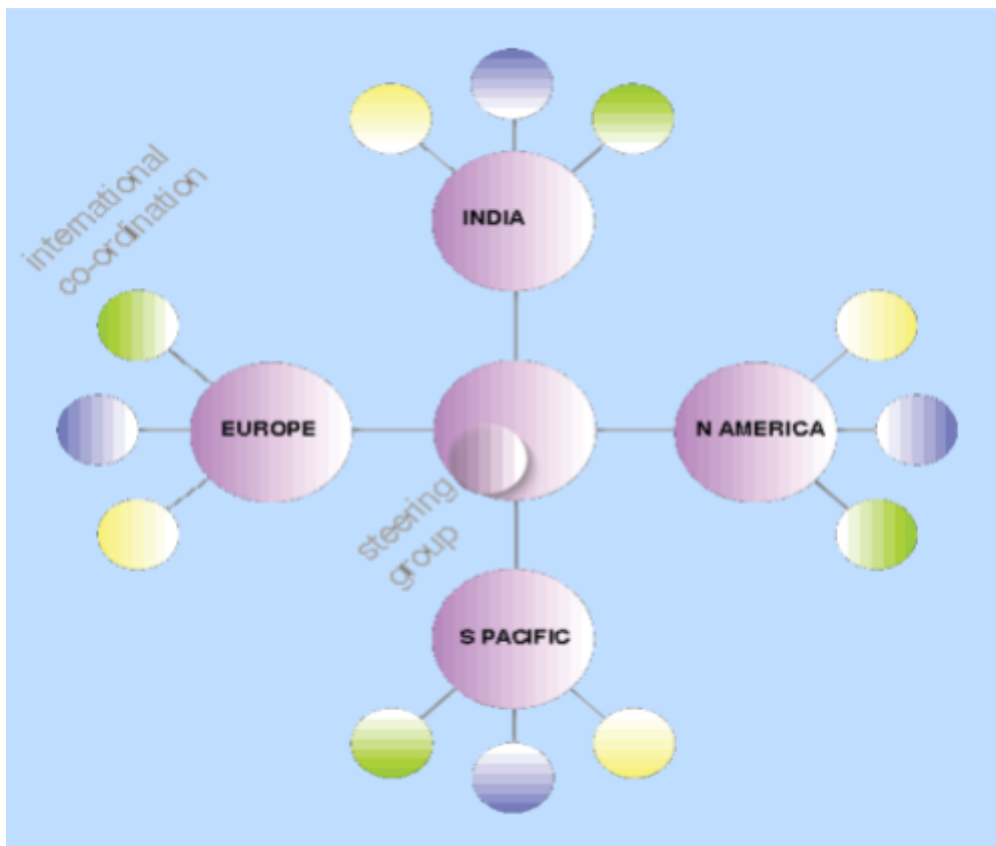
Intended to provide a forum for overall coordination and dialogue is a set of six 'Area Councils', one for each of the above Areas, plus an 'International Council', which met for the first time in 2011.

The Area Councils are made up of a man and woman representative from each of the three strands in that area, ie six people.

The International Council, which meets every 18 months, consists of everyone in all six Councils plus the Chair and both Deputies of the College and various other 'key figures'.

The International Council in turn has a 'Steering Group' for continuity and organisation in-between meetings. The individuals currently participating are shown in the table in the Appendix.

All this is illustrated in the diagram below, the larger circles representing the 'Areas' (only four being shown in the diagram) and the smaller circles the three strands, ie the Movement, Order, and College. At the centre is the International Assembly and its Steering Group.



**Triratna's international structure: three Strands, six Areas (only 4 shown), and an International Council with Steering Group**

The International Council is important for Triratna's unity and coherence and work so far has included clarifying our Shared System of Practice and initiating the Sikkha Project which is concerned with standards of what is taught at our Centres.

### **Single-sex activities and the two 'wings' of the Order**

Throughout Triratna as a whole, there's a strong emphasis on single-sex activities, with women taking full responsibility for initiating and sustaining women's projects of all sorts; and men for men's. Of course there is collaboration and cooperation between the men and women across Triratna, most obviously in large Order gatherings and in running individual Buddhist Centres, where the local Chair may be male or female.

### **Triratna's organisational structure - locally**

Looking on a smaller, more local scale, each of Triratna's various 'Areas' have their own more local structure. In UK/Ireland there are 'regions': London, East Anglian, Northern, Scotland, Midlands, South-East, South-West, and Ireland regions - again, this has the flexibility to change over time. In Europe, the various countries and languages make for a series of natural divisions; in the US the East and West coasts are so far apart that Triratna activities there naturally divide into two; India similarly has enormous geographical and linguistic variations.

Each region may contain several Buddhist Centres, a few dozen Order Members, and perhaps one or two Preceptors - ie, at least some of each of Triratna's three 'strands', and these three will make efforts to stay in touch at the local level, usually informally. For many members of the Triratna Buddhist Community, their local situation is what they see and know: it's where their friends are, the projects they support, it's where they've contacted the Dharma and 'grown up' spiritually. Not surprisingly therefore, it's often also where their loyalties lie. Seeing Triratna Newsbytes, or sampling the talks on FreeBuddhistAudio, or going on retreat are ways people come to realise Triratna is a much bigger thing than they first thought. As someone's interest and involvement in Triratna deepens, hopefully so does their interest in and identification with Triratna as a whole - especially once they begin to approach ordination. There is only one Triratna Buddhist Community and one Order, even if for practical purposes an individual's horizons may not extend much beyond their local situation.

### **Centres, Co-ops, and Communities: the 'three C's'**

Triratna has traditionally emphasised the need for spiritual practice to include all areas of life - and to have a real effect on the society in which we live. This has led to Triratna's famous 'Three C's' - Centres, Co-ops, and Communities. Centres means of course Buddhist Centres (each of which is more than likely to be registered as a charity); Co-ops means Right Livelihood businesses of whatever legal structure (co-operatively, not-for-profit or limited company), and Communities means residential communities (which range from quite formal 'semi-monastic' single-sex establishments to more casual shared houses - which would nevertheless include a shrine room and weekly community night).

All of these can be seen as formal institutions, to some degree or another, and Triratna has always seen creating strong and enduring institutions as part of establishing an enduring spiritual community: in a famous talk given in the 1990s Sangharakshita listed the 'Five Pillars of the FWBO', one of which was Institutions.

## **Responsibilities and roles within Triratna**

Triratna only works because it provides a rich and effective context within which individuals can lead their spiritual lives - and because those individuals are willing to take responsibility for helping Triratna to continue. Triratna has always seen taking responsibility as one way (but not the only way) of actively following the spiritual path. A range of roles and titles have thus grown up, with various degrees of responsibility attached.

First and foremost is of course the individual practitioner taking responsibility for their own commitment to practising the Buddhist path within the Triratna Buddhist Community. In general people are seen as moving from beginner (anyone newly come to Triratna) to Friend (someone who practices regularly with Triratna) to Mitra (someone who's made public their aspiration to practice the Buddhist path within the context of Triratna) to Order Member (someone recognised by the Preceptors' College as 'effectively Going for Refuge' and thereby ordained into the Triratna Buddhist Order following a long process of preparation). Although these probably serve as a rough guide to how long someone's been practising, they cannot be correlated in any way with anyone's depth of spiritual insight, and in general it's considered bad form in Triratna to claim any specific insights or degree of progress along the Path - even though it's clearly stated that spiritual insights are attainable and that progress is possible.

Within Triratna's institutions, different institutions' legal frameworks naturally govern the details of what is needed, how people are elected, the terms they serve, etc, but the principle is always to match responsibility with experience, and especially spiritual responsibility with spiritual experience. There is a parallel principle sometimes referred to as "up and out" - actively cultivating one's successor so that in due course one is freed up to move on to something else. And there is also a principle of voluntarism - all Triratna's roles have to be filled by people freely volunteering for them - no-one is ever ordered to go anywhere or to do anything by anybody.

### **Centre roles and responsibilities: Chairs and Centre Councils**

At Centres, those leading or teaching classes are generally (not always) Order Members, though it's generally recognised that simply being ordained doesn't mean that one is ready to teach or skilled in teaching. In general, the various classes at a Centre will each have a leader plus a class team, made up of men and women of all levels of experience, and supporting classes is a traditional first step in getting more involved in Triratna. Overall, Centres will be governed by Councils, corresponding to charity trustees if the Centre is a registered charity. Again, Council Members are generally but not always Order Members.



The Centre's Chair is both chair of the trustee body and the overall spiritual guardian of the Centre, responsible for all aspects of life and practice at that Centre. They'd also have a Treasurer and a Secretary - and other roles as needed.

### **Centre roles and responsibilities: Mitra Convenors, and Presidents**

Centres also aim to have men and women 'Mitra Convenors', specifically charged with looking after the spiritual and organisational needs of the men and women mitras of that Centre.

Most Centres also have Presidents, long-term and an ex-officio positions held by a senior Order Member from outside the immediate situation. Presidents are especially useful for maintaining long-term perspectives on the situation and when difficulties arise or a transition in the Centre's leadership needs to be negotiated.

### **Regional meetings**

Both Centre Chairs, Mitra Convenors, and Presidents will probably participate in regional Triratna meetings: the Chairs Assembly (a mixed-sex gathering), the men's and women's Mitra Convenors' meetings, and the Presidents' meeting. All would aim to meet at least annually for a few days, using their time to come build personal friendships between them as well as consider Triratna as a whole and attending to their specific business. Such long gatherings, half retreat and half business meeting, are a feature of Triratna and help people carrying similar responsibilities build up strong connections between one another. The European Chairs Assembly, or ECA, has been meeting for many years and is very much appreciated by its members.

### **Other Movement responsibilities**

Triratna Buddhist centres aim to create thriving spiritual communities around them. Traditionally these would aim to include one or more Communities and Right Livelihood businesses; sometimes independent, often owned by the Centre charity. The businesses especially would have their own leaders - managers or directors - who might or might not sit on the Centre's council. Triratna communities traditionally don't have much if anything in the way of formal roles.

Some of Triratna's Right Livelihood businesses, such as Windhorse Publications, are not associated with any particular Centre, and send their own representative to the Chairs Assembly.

### **Order roles and responsibilities**

The Order has always seen itself as having no official organisational existence, being a purely spiritual body. Nonetheless, it too needs people to take responsibility for its continued welfare. At a local level, most Order Members are part of a local men's or women's Chapter of 5-10 people which generally meet weekly. Each Chapter would aim to have a Chapter Convenor to help it run smoothly and stay in communication with the wider Order; having most Order Members outside of India, the regions in the UK/Ireland have Regional Order Convenors which meet regularly; and the Order as a whole has men and women Order

Convenors in each of its six regions; their job is to organise larger Order gatherings (such as biannual Order Conventions) and to stay in touch with the Chapter and Regional Order Convenors - and thus the 'pulse' of the Order. A small Order Office, based in the UK, receives voluntary donations from Order Members worldwide and from that supports two International Order convenors plus organising the production of Shabda, the long-running confidential monthly Order newsletter.

### **Preceptors' roles and responsibilities: training for ordination**

Triratna has always taken ordination, ie joining the Order, very seriously, and devotes considerable time and energy to helping people prepare for Ordination. After asking for ordination it takes on average 3-6 years (sometimes much longer) to enter the Order, during which time people would be attending a series of special training retreats ending with a long (often three- or four-month) ordination retreat. They will have developed strong enough relationships with a number of local Order Members who can thus whole-heartedly recommend them, and of course created a relationship with their future Preceptors, ie the senior Order Members who will actually conduct the ceremony.

Most if not all of Triratna's regions have independent men's and women's Ordination Teams, and this is certainly the ideal: following the model of two 'wings' of the Order already mentioned, Triratna values very highly the strength and independence given by having a fully-fledged independent ordination process for women run by women - something probably unique in the Buddhist world. In the UK the two full-time Ordination Teams operate out of their own retreat centres, Padmaloka (men) and Tiratanaloka (women).

Ordination itself consists of a 1-to-1 ceremony with one's Private Preceptor, followed by the public welcoming into the Order, a ceremony conducted by the Public Preceptor on behalf of the Order as a whole. The Private Preceptor functions as a personal mentor, friend and guide both before and after ordination, whilst the Public Preceptor is generally a more formal relationship and includes a broader responsibility to ensure the integrity of the ordination processes that lead towards ordination - in fact, the integrity of Triratna as a whole. Order Members must be ordained at least 10 years before they are eligible to act as Preceptors, and their suitability to continue doing so is reviewed every seven years. The Public Preceptors collectively constitute the College of Public Preceptors, which also meets about twice a year for several days - outside this time they are for practical purposes working in smaller 'kulas' often organised on geographical lines.

These three 'strands', autonomous and regional, yet cooperating, collectively make up the worldwide Triratna Buddhist Community and Order and formally meet at the International Council as well as, less formally, at Order Conventions.

## **Financing Triratna: where the money comes from**

Understanding Triratna's various principles, roles and responsibilities is important, but people will probably not feel they have a full understanding of how it all works without some insight into its finances: where the money comes from and where it goes, who gets to spend it and how much we're talking about...Unfortunately (so far at least) Triratna has failed to attract any millionaire pop stars or Buddhist governments: there really are no Rolls-Royces or Swiss bank accounts behind the scenes! Its money has very much been earned by Triratna itself, often by the very hard work of many people. Getting and spending money wisely is very much seen as a spiritual practice in its own right, with autonomy, dana (generosity), and simple living as central guiding principles.

The principle of autonomy means that each Triratna institution (or individual) retains full control and responsibility for its own finances and financial health. This is balanced by the principle of dana, or generosity, which encourages Triratna institutions and individuals to 'give what they can' to support wider projects and others in need. As a result money flows around Triratna in all sorts of ways, as people respond to appeals in ways large and small, public and private. The principle of simplicity asks people to just 'take what they need'.

### **Money in the Movement**

The finances of most individual Centres, at least in the UK, are publicly available on the Charity Commission's website, as are the Order Office's accounts (whose charity is known as the Triratna Trust) and the Preceptors College (whose charity is the Triratna Preceptors' College Trust). Triratna's UK Buddhist Centres range from the very small and struggling to the well-established (eg the London Buddhist Centre, annual income over £800,000). There is a mixture of income from classes, standing orders and other dana from individuals, and rents from property owned by the Centre - plus, possibly, unexpected gifts such as a legacy. Sometimes local Right Livelihood enterprises have been able to make generous donations to their local Centres or other Triratna projects, but of course they can only do this if they themselves are profitable. Many Centres have put considerable effort into buying property to secure their future, so have significant assets on their balance sheets - but mortgages to match!

Centre's incomes are naturally used mainly to finance their own activities, including of course supporting the local Centre team. In supporting individuals Triratna has always aimed to be flexible, meeting people's different needs according to their different circumstances - and the general principle of simplicity in lifestyle.

At the same time, in the UK especially, Triratna's Buddhist Centres have a well-established and effective system of voluntarily pooling some of their income in order to finance movement-wide projects of benefit to all Centres. This is known as the Triratna Development Fund whose income is approximately £100,000/year - it helps finance the Triratna Development Team and projects like Windhorse Publications, Clear Vision, and the [thebuddhistcentre.com](http://thebuddhistcentre.com), Triratna's main website.

Another initiative from the ECA has been the creation of the [Future Dharma Fund](#) which raises money and distributes it to the most promising, worthwhile and necessary projects around Triratna.

### **Money in the Order**

As already mentioned, with the exception of a small 'Order Office', the Order has no official organisational existence, and often refers to itself simply as a 'free association of individuals'. Not surprisingly therefore, the Order's finances are less organised. Order Members are encouraged to give £120/year to the Order Office as a voluntary 'Order Contribution', which is used to finance the Order Office, the two International Order Convenors, and to produce Shabda, the Order's monthly newsletter - which all Order members are entitled to receive whether they make contributions or not. Order events such as Order Weekends and the biannual Order Convention are charged by the hosting venue. Beyond this, many acts of personal generosity take place, but by their nature are unrecorded, at least centrally.

Since 2008 the Abhayaratna Trust, a UK charity dedicated to providing for members of the Order who are old or in ill-health, or who need financial support, in particular to attend retreats and other Order gatherings. Given that the average age of the Order is steadily rising, this is a very welcome development.

### **Money in the Preceptors College**

Financing Triratna's Preceptors is probably the least-developed part of Triratna's work. Being a Public Preceptor (ie a member of the Preceptors College) especially requires considerable time, both attending meetings and working with individuals 1-1, but there are no official funds available to support this work: individual preceptors have to find their own sources of support. Sometimes this comes from personal dana given by friends and 'disciples', some are 'working preceptors' supported by retreat centres.

### **Indian fundraising**

One of Triratna's greatest success stories is the fundraising that has been done to support Triratna's Indian wing - formerly TBMSG and now known as the Triratna Bauddha Mahasangha. The UK-based Karuna's Trust's door-knocking appeals have, over the past 20 years, built up a network of some 8,000 regular donors enabling Karuna to send over £1.5m/year to a multitude of social and Dhamma projects in India - many, but not all, associated with Triratna. Triratna in India has also had considerable success with fundraising from wealthy Taiwanese donors who have funded many of its larger buildings. More recently, Triratna's UK-based India Dhamma Trust has focussed on raising funds to support the Ordination process in India. All these, together with its growing door-to-door collections in India itself, have set it firmly on the path to self-sufficiency - although the need for funds in India remains great.

## **Conclusion**

Any international movement which has grown organically over years will present a complex picture to the outside world - and very likely, to itself.

This document aims to outline, reasonably clearly, both the principles underlying Triratna's organisational structure and some of the details of its activities and financing.

Being a living system, it is continually evolving and will continue to do: some, though hopefully not all, of the details here will soon be out of date!

The principles, however, should endure.

## Appendices

### Further Information

For more on Triratna, see its main website [thebuddhistcentre.com](http://thebuddhistcentre.com)

For more on Sangharakshita, see his website at [www.sangharakshita.org](http://www.sangharakshita.org)

### Participants in the most recent International Council

Area	Order	Movement	College
UK/Ireland	Sucimani Shantigarbha	Dassini Jnanadhara	Paramabandhu Dhammadinna
USA/Canada	Shantinayaka Amala	Dharmashuri Viveka	Viradhamma Karunadevi
India	Amrutdeep Viyaja	Ratnashri Nagaketu	Yashosagar Karmavajri
South Pacific	Vajrajyoti Dhiramani	Maitripala Dharmananda	Purna
Latin America & Spain	Vajranatha	Viryakirti Jnanadakini	Moksananda Paramachitta
Mainland Europe	Akasasuri Arthakusalin	Jnanacandra Advayasiddhi	Amogharatna Kulanandi
Steering Group	Aryajaya Lokeshvara Vajrajyoti	Jnanacandra Amrutdeep Viveka	Dhammarati Ratnadharini Saddhaloka