

Guidelines on couples and brahmacarya at Sudarshanaloka

Background

The practice of brahmacarya, understood as a positive state of freedom from sexual craving (and therefore sexual activity), is a noble ideal, long established in the Buddhist (and many other) spiritual traditions. In the short history of Triratna it has also been generally understood that in contexts of more intense practice, such as on a retreat, brahmacarya is a very supportive condition. *“Meditation and celibacy go together, they mutually reinforce each other.”* (Sangharakshita, *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*, 1984.)

However, over the past thirty or so years of the existence of Sudarshanaloka Retreat Centre attitudes to sexual activity on the property and the inclusion of couples as part of the community have fluctuated. As far as we know there has never been a widely agreed understanding of these topics or clearly stated guidelines.

These present guidelines have been developed after a review of past events and attitudes around couples at Sudarshanaloka and a desire to be as open as possible to a wide range of potential participants in the Sudarshanaloka project. They are the result of much discussion among board and management team members, taking into account responses from Trust members.

Group and solitary Retreats, workshops and other events, including hire-outs.

Implicit in the notion of being on retreat is the promise of a context where one can leave behind the pressures and demands of everyday life, the ‘business as usual’ interactions with work, family, partners and members of our wider community. We hope to enter into a deeper relationship with ourselves and a mutually supportive one with fellow retreatants and the life-world surrounding us: a simpler, truer relating based less on craving and aversion and more on metta, mindfulness, internal stillness and contentment.

“Brahmacarya, chastity in the true sense, is not just a deprivation of something that you would really like to have... It represents a state of integration and harmony and equilibrium which depends less and less on outside satisfactions, especially the sexual.”

(Sangharakshita, *Transcending Gender* from an unpublished seminar, *Precepts of the Gurus – 3rd Seminar*, 1979).

Moreover, being able to trust that one is entering a non-sexualised environment is paramount to allowing the ease and relaxation that is so crucial to the deepening into practice that is the *raison d'être* for going on retreat.

For these reasons we request that retreatants refrain from sexual activity while on retreat at Sudarshanaloka.

Volunteers and visitors

While the same holds true to some extent for those volunteering or visiting there is not the same explicit focus on meditation and other essential practices for which brahmacharya is an invaluable support. Couples or families visit or volunteer and may be accommodated together, so while there is no proscription against sexual activity we request that visitors are respectful of the nature of the non-sexualised environment we are attempting to create.

Permanent Community members and longer-term volunteers

At this level of engagement with Sudarshanaloka, where people live and work together in sometimes intense circumstances, we once again wish to foreground the value of a non-sexualised environment. However, recognising the realities of our human lives it's clear that sexual relationships will sometimes be a part of the lives of community members, whether those relationships arrive fully formed as it were or develop between people living and working at Sudarshanaloka. We recognise that while of great value, celibacy can be unhelpful when it is too much of a discipline, when it results in the suppression, not just of one's sexual feelings, but even of one's emotions, energy and creativity.

Notwithstanding what has already been said above about stillness, simplicity and contentment and the value of brahmacharya, perhaps the concern here is not so much about sexual activity per se but the skewing of group dynamics that can happen when intimate partners are both part of a residential community. This could have a greater or lesser effect depending on a number of factors.

When anyone is inspired to contribute to the amazing Sudarshanaloka mandala we need to take all of who they are into account when deciding whether they may join the community. Everyone who is offering their time and energy is unique in themselves and in their circumstances, and will be treated as such. As well as the usual factors that are considered when someone asks to join the team/community, if the request is from a couple then additional considerations such as the following will also be part of the mix:

- The emotional and spiritual maturity of all the members of the team/community but particularly of the couple themselves
- The length of time the couple have been together
- The couple's intended role and position in the team/community
- Levels of trust and openness generally present in the team/community
- Everyone's willingness to engage in dialogue if any difficulties arise due to *any* relationship dynamics

'Right-relating' between each and every team/community member is everyone's responsibility and so needs to be cared for by all. This requires a high degree of trust and transparency as to the unfolding dynamics of the group. This quality is more important than whether someone is in a relationship or not.

It will be assumed that anyone invited to live and work at Sudarshanaloka accepts and agrees to comply with the guidelines prior to being invited to join the resident community.

