

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 5: Buddhism and the Triratna Buddhist Community, Devotional Practice

Week 3: The Distinctive Emphases of Triratna

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The common ground

The Triratna Buddhist Community is radical, in that it seeks to get back to what is universal in the Buddhist tradition: that which can jump the centuries, cross cultures, and speak directly to us here and now. But Triratna is still a recognisably Buddhist movement, and it shares a lot of common ground with other Buddhist schools. This is not surprising, as it bases its approach on the core teachings and practices that are the basis for all schools.

Nevertheless Triratna is a creative response to present-day Western conditions. These are very different from those in 500 BCE India, First Millennium China, or medieval Tibet and Japan. So, not surprisingly, there are some things about Triratna that are quite distinctive.

An ‘ecumenical’ approach

The first distinctive feature of Triratna is that we have an ‘ecumenical’ approach. The word ‘ecumenical’ is derived from the Christian tradition, where it means transcending the differences between different sects or churches. As we saw in the last session, the underlying unity of Buddhism is an important principle behind Triratna. We do not identify exclusively with any sect or tradition, or with any cultural manifestation of Buddhism. So we do not equate Buddhism with any one of its historical schools, or with any one of the various national cultures in which the Eastern schools are embodied. Instead we seek to see what the various schools have in common, looking for the general truths behind the particular cultural forms of Buddhism, at the same time as drawing inspiration and practices from the whole Buddhist tradition.

In the centuries and millennia after the Buddha’s death, Buddhism took its message outwards from India into a wide range of new cultures and circumstances. Spread over a vast area, in an age when travel was slow and dangerous, and other forms of communication over long distances were non-existent, a number of different schools developed which were largely isolated from each other. Members of these schools often had little knowledge of each other, and they had no historical overview of the Buddhist tradition. They therefore each tended to see themselves as the true representative of the Buddhist tradition at its best.

But now for the first time in history all the Buddhist schools can be aware of each other, and we can see the historical process through which each developed. It is no longer possible to regard any one sect as ‘real’ Buddhism, except by ignoring the facts. However this is what many traditional schools still try to do, even when

transplanted to the West. It is still quite normal for such transplanted schools in their public classes to put forward their particular teachings as ‘Buddhism’, making no mention of the teachings or practices of any other tradition.

For Buddhism to take root in the West it has to outgrow this culturally based sectarianism. We need to look at the different schools, see what they have in common, appreciate them, gain inspiration from them, and learn from them. We need to get back to the basic truths of Buddhism that underlie all schools, and use what is useful under present circumstances from the whole range of the tradition. And we need to do this without simply taking a magpie approach, picking up the glittery parts of the various schools that attract our eye, while ignoring the apparently duller or more challenging teachings and practices that may be what we really need to transform ourselves. All this is what Triratna is trying to do, although we are still at an early stage.

This might seem obvious. We tend to take this appreciation of the whole tradition for granted in Triratna, but it is a very unusual approach. Yet this is probably the only approach that will allow Buddhism to have the full impact on the modern world that it deserves – and that the modern world so badly needs. (Incidentally, all this is not to say that modern Westerners cannot make spiritual progress through one of the traditional schools.)

The centrality of Going for Refuge

A second distinctive emphasis of Triratna is that we see Going for Refuge as primary in the spiritual life, and particular lifestyles or practices as secondary. We could paraphrase this by saying that what is most important is our commitment to spiritual growth, while the way we put this commitment into practice may vary from person to person and time to time.

What is important is our commitment to the Three Jewels. Firstly this means commitment to becoming more like the Buddha, the ideal of Enlightenment. Secondly it means commitment to understanding and practising the Dharma. Thirdly it means coming into greater and greater harmony and communication with our fellow practitioners, so that between us we create the Sangha. The level and constancy of this commitment is what will mainly determine whether we make progress. Without this commitment, the most favourable lifestyle and the most supposedly ‘advanced’ practices will be useless. With this commitment, we will use difficulties as opportunities to grow, and the simplest practices will reveal depths that are unimaginable to the uncommitted.

In contrast to Triratna’s approach, many traditional schools see a particular lifestyle or practice as central to being a ‘real’ Buddhist. So in some schools what makes someone a ‘real’ Buddhist is living the monastic life. In other schools it is a particular practice or set of practices – ‘Just Sitting’ meditation in Zen, a particular chant in Nichiren and ‘True Pure Land’ Buddhism, or a particular sequence of meditations leading up to tantric initiation in some Tibetan schools. But in fact

particular lifestyles or practices are all means to an end. They are not central to being a ‘real’ Buddhist. What is central is Going for Refuge.

Because Going for Refuge is primary, while lifestyle is secondary, the Triratna Buddhist Order is ‘neither monk nor lay.’ Some Order members live what is effectively a monastic life. Some live a ‘lay’ life, bringing up a family and earning the money needed to do this. Many combine elements of both lifestyles, perhaps living in a semi-monastic community without being celibate, or alternating periods of meditative monastic living ‘on retreat’ with periods of activity ‘in the world’. After all, the strict division between monk and lay was a product of traditional societies where no other possibility was allowed, and in the modern world we can be less rigid. What unites members of the Order is not a lifestyle, but the fact that they have all been recognised as ‘effectively’ Going for Refuge, which means that their commitment has been seen to be powerful enough, consistent enough, and central enough in their lives to have a noticeable effect over a significant period of time.

Because Going for Refuge is primary, members of the Triratna Buddhist Order – and to a lesser extent friends and mitras – will engage in a range of practices suited to their temperament and circumstances. In the earlier stages of practice what is important is to lay a firm foundation. So in our first few years of practice most of us need to focus mainly on the Five Precepts, the Mindfulness of Breathing, and the *Mettā Bhāvanā*. However even in the earlier stages, Triratna encompasses a range of approaches, with people emphasising different aspects of practice, and drawing inspiration from different sources. When we have been practising for longer, Going for Refuge can manifest in even more diverse ways. In consultation with their Preceptors, new Order members take on a range of meditations, and develop their own regime of practice, suited to their temperament and circumstances. Again, the Triratna Buddhist Order can happily include this range of diversity, because Going for Refuge is primary, while the particular practices we take up to express and deepen our Going for Refuge may vary according to needs and circumstances.

Finally, one manifestation of the centrality of Going for Refuge in Triratna is that the people who lead and guide the movement’s institutions are those who have shown themselves to be effectively going for refuge over a significant period of time – in other words, members of the Triratna Buddhist Order. Before he founded the FWBO, Sangharakshita observed that many modern Buddhist organisations were controlled by people who were not committed Buddhists. This is obviously not the way to set up an effective, liberating spiritual movement, and he was determined that Triratna should be run by the spiritually committed. In effect this means that the various Triratna charities that manage centres and other Triratna initiatives are run mainly by Order members – those people who have been recognised as effectively going for refuge. This is still viewed as an important principle of Triratna, which is partly responsible for its success. However, it can seem odd to some people – who want to apply egalitarian principles, derived from politics, to the spiritual life – that the important decisions at a centre are usually made by Order members, and not by a vote among the people who attend.

The importance of friendship

An emphasis on ‘horizontal’ friendship is a possibly unique aspect of Triratna. Many schools encourage devotion to the teacher, master, or guru, but few emphasise friendship between people who are at a similar stage of the path – ‘horizontal’ friendships – possibly because warm close friendships were taken for granted in traditional societies. However in Triratna friendship is seen as an important part to the spiritual life in two ways: firstly as a way of overcoming our self-obsession and deluded view, and secondly as an aspect of the goal of Enlightenment itself.

The Buddha said on a number of occasions that spiritual friendship is an essential part of the spiritual life. Because it is an aspect that many Westerners do not find easy, and one that our culture makes difficult – by encouraging individualism, competitiveness, and mobility – it is an aspect that we particularly need to emphasise.

Developing friendship is part of the way we grow. We transcend our egotism and break out of the box of our self-concern by deep and open communication, by developing empathy, by becoming more concerned for others, and by developing qualities such as loyalty and gratitude. We need friendship to develop mettā, compassion, and sympathetic joy – ultimately we aim to experience these for all other beings, but we need to start with our friends, who are not linked to us by ties of blood or self-interest, but for whom we feel warm affection.

Spiritual friends also help us to see ourselves more clearly – an essential part of growth. We all have aspects of ourselves that we hide from others – which makes it very difficult to work on them. Learning to be open and honest with others, taking off our mask, helps us to leave these hidden aspects behind, and move on. We all also have ‘blind spots’ – aspects of ourselves that we do not know about, which we hide even from ourselves. Spiritual friends – who take our spiritual well-being to heart, rather than colluding with us for an easy life – will help us to see these blind spots. Unless we are open to seeing ourselves as others see us we will probably never move forward, because we will not know ourselves as we really are.

This last point also brings out the fact that Spiritual growth requires an element of ‘vertical’ friendship – contact with those who are more experienced in the spiritual life than we are. In most traditional schools this relationship is formalised in a strict teacher-pupil or guru-disciple relationship. However Sangharakshita has pointed out that the guru-disciple relationship has many dangers, especially for Westerners, and that we do not usually need a ‘great guru’ – even if we could find one who would accept us. What we do need is contact with people who are more strongly in touch with a spiritual vision than we are, and who have more experience of the spiritual path than we do. It has been said that “the spiritual life is caught, not taught.” So having contact with people who have been practising longer than we have is an important part of our practice in Triratna.

So far we have talked about friendship as a means to an end. But friendship is also an end in itself. Friendship is an essential part of a happy, human life – and one of which many people are starved in the modern West. At a higher level, friendship can be seen as an important aspect of the spiritual goal. Enlightenment is a state in which we transcend our small, self-referential frame of reference and become a friend of the world. In effect we take our mundane human friendliness and raise it to new level, so that we are united in friendliness to all other people, to all other beings, and to the universe itself. We cannot hope to achieve this universal friendliness unless we start by behaving as a friend to at least a few real people.

Because of the emphasis on friendship, many Triratna Buddhists choose to live in residential communities. To really get to know people and develop deep friendships we need to spend time with them, and not just when we are on our best behaviour. Not everyone is in a position to live in a community, but for those that are, it can be an important help to spiritual practice, letting us immerse ourselves more deeply in the spiritual life, eroding our individualism and self obsession, allowing us to see ourselves more clearly, and – last but not least – helping us develop deeper friendships.

The importance of work

The Triratna Buddhist Community offers a balanced approach to the spiritual life. An important part of this balance is the need to balance meditation, on the one hand, with energy and activity on the other. Energy is one of the characteristics of Enlightenment. But there can be a tendency to associate the spiritual life with being simply calm, inactive, and delicate. If we give a one-sided emphasis to calm inactivity we will tend to repress our energy, which will become stagnant or turn negative. This can be a problem in some traditional Eastern monastic settings. To quote Sangharakshita:

‘...work is very important, because if you’re working...you’re putting energy into something, with the result that energy does not stagnate. If there is any sort of curse of monasticism in the East, and it’s a real curse, it’s simply stagnation and idleness.’

The major exception to this comment is the Zen tradition, in which daily physical work is an integral part of monastery life.

Triratna’s emphasis on work can sound odd to some Westerners, because for many of us ‘worldly’ careers, which we follow mainly for money and status, can make it difficult to find time and energy for spiritual practice. Hence many Buddhists find it helpful to reduce the time they spend working, and to take periods off work when they can explore different aspects of their being. Such periods of ‘idleness’ are probably essential for most of us, and they may be particularly important if our life so far has been dominated by work or career. But the problem arises when we see idleness as a long term lifestyle – we have energy, and we need to use it to have a positive effect on the world, both for our own sake and for the sake of others.

The usefulness of work as part of our spiritual life depends on our motivation. If we are working just to earn a living, then it is probably a good idea to do as little of it as possible, and to simplify our life accordingly. However we will then need to find other more useful ways of using our energy. The type of work that Sangharakshita recommends as part of our spiritual life is work that has an altruistic or spiritual motivation, because it is helping to spread the Dharma, because it helps us to work on ourselves, because it helps us develop spiritual friendship, or because it helps other people.

‘Team-based Right Livelihood businesses’

One very distinctive feature of Triratna are our team-based businesses. Apart from enabling people to earn a living in an ethical way, in an environment conducive to spiritual practice, these projects aim to help Buddhists to activate and engage their energies, and to provide a context in which we can use work as a direct spiritual practice.

Sangharakshita’s has said that ‘Work is the Tantric guru.’ In the Tantric tradition, one of the guru’s roles is to confront the disciple with their own shortcomings, and with the true nature of things. In the same way, work confronts us with ourselves, and, if we are honest, it forces us to change. Work provides us with an objective way of looking at ourselves. If the outcome of our work is ineffective, or if we are out of harmony with our team-mates, then we are made to look at those aspects of ourselves that contribute to the situation, and which we need to change. So work in a team-based business can be a challenging and powerful spiritual practice, which allows us to grow and change far faster than would be possible in a less intense situation.

Work for others

When our work helps other people – especially when it helps them spiritually – it becomes fully aligned with our spiritual ideals, and we can throw ourselves into it wholeheartedly. If we are building a Buddhist Centre, raising money to spread the Dharma, or publishing Dharma books, we will experience our work not just as a job, but as a vocation. Work that genuinely relieves people’s suffering – either psychological or physical – will have a similar effect. For this reason Triratna has set up a charity, the Karuna Trust, to help Buddhists in the prosperous West use their energies to work for others less physically fortunate. Working for others is deeply satisfying, and has far-reaching spiritual consequences. To the extent that our work is truly about others, to that extent we transcend ourselves, breaking down our rigid self identification – which is the whole purpose of the spiritual life. When work for others is part of a balanced practice, including spiritual community, meditation, and devotion to a spiritual cause, it can be a powerful ingredient in gaining Insight.

The importance of the Arts

Unlike most Eastern cultures (except China) when they first encountered Buddhism, the West has a very well developed cultural and artistic tradition. At its best this tradition communicates spiritual values and a spiritual vision, and because it is culturally closer to us than Eastern forms of the Dharma, it can be a valuable bridge to a more spiritual view of life. Also, because many of us live in cities which are a far cry from the beautiful natural settings in which many Buddhists of the past have practised, we need ways of contacting the sense of beauty and wonder that we can get from living in nature. Contact with the arts can give us this, as well as helping us to grow spiritually in some of the following ways.

Art helps us expand our experience and broaden our sympathies

The Arts can allow us to live through experiences that have never happened to us in 'real' life, letting us grow through them and learn from them almost as though they had been our own. Through a play, novel or poem we can enter into the world, the thoughts, and the feelings of another person. We can know what it is like to be them, and we can develop a sense of sympathy for them. Visual art can have the same effect – really looking at Rembrandt's self-portraits, for example, lets us experience what it felt like to be that man at various points in a life that was both tragic and fulfilling. In the same way, music can directly communicate what it is like to feel as another human being feels. Art can allow us to know what it is like to be another person, of a very different age, nation, race, culture, gender, and temperament. This broadening of our experience and our ability to identify with others is a very real expansion of our being. It is spiritual growth.

Art enlarges our imagination

Our separation from nature and the emphasis on mundane facts in our culture can atrophy our imagination. We need to counteract this, because imagination is an important faculty in the spiritual life. It allows us to contact possible ways of being that are completely beyond us at present. Imagination also opens a gateway to the visionary world we can experience in meditation – if our imagination is impoverished, our meditation is likely to be so too. Engaging in art, whether in creating it or appreciating it, strengthens the imagination, just as we strengthen a muscle by taking physical exercise.

Art refines and redirects our emotions

Usually our emotions are tied to a fairly coarse, basic level of existence. What excites them most usually has to do with things like sex, physical pleasure, money, possessions, security, and self-importance – things that derive from our animal nature. Our emotions are what drive us, and as long as most of our emotional energy is stuck at this level, we will have little real drive for spiritual progress. We therefore need to progressively refine and raise the level of our emotions, so that more and more we get our satisfaction from the spiritual plane, and so that our emotions are linked to this plane. Art, and any experience of beauty, tends to refine our emotions. When we delight in the beauty of a piece of music, a painting, a building, or a tree, our emotions are engaged in a way that is not related to our

animal ego. When we appreciate a sonnet or a sunset, this does not involve wanting to own it, eat it, or have sex with it. The more we hook our emotions to this sort of aesthetic appreciation, the more emotional energy we will be able to muster behind our meditation practice, and the more we can move our motivations up to the level of the spiritual and the transcendental.

Art can communicate spiritual values

The greatest art comes from the realm that the Dharma comes from – the creators of great art often speak of something communicating itself through them, something that transcends anything they are normally in touch with in their more mundane, non-creative times. Indeed the greatest art is Dharma, in its broadest definition. It derives from a spiritual vision and communicates spiritual values. It often does this in a way that is not linked specifically to any one ‘religious’ formulation of the Dharma, although it may be strongly flavoured by a particular religion, if the artist practised it. Great art is the Dharma communicated in a very attractive way, a way that makes us want to change ourselves. Truth communicated in a beautiful way is uniquely powerful.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have any of the ‘distinctive emphases’ described in the text been important in your decision to practice with Triratna rather than with a traditional Asian school? Are there any of the ‘emphases’ that you don’t relate to?
2. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of an ‘ecumenical’ approach to Buddhism? How can we guard against any dangers it might involve?
3. The Triratna Buddhist Community’s emphasis on Going for Refuge seems to give priority to commitment as a spiritual quality. How do you think commitment is related to other aspects of spiritual progress, such as simplicity of life, śraddhā, insight, and concern for others? How might commitment lead to each of these, and how might each of these lead to commitment?
4. Has the quality of your friendships changed since getting involved in Triratna? In what ways?
5. Do you tend to see calm or energy as more important in the spiritual life? What are the advantages and dangers of both points of view?
6. Do you think you need to do more work, or less? Would the answer be different if you did a different sort of work? Have you ever experienced work as ‘the Tantric Guru?’
7. What is the difference between art that can help us to develop spiritually, and mere entertainment that we use to distract ourselves?