

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Foundation Year

Teachers' Notes

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Introduction – welcome to the study leader

Welcome, and thanks for offering to act as a study leader for the Mitra Foundation Course. Before getting on to the material itself it might be helpful to be aware of the structure of the course, the nature of the material, and the recommended approach to using it.

Structure

The course is structured to explore the three declarations we ask people if they can honestly make before they become a mitra. These are:

1. I think of myself as a Buddhist
2. I am sincerely trying to practice the Dharma, (particularly but not exclusively the Five Precepts)
3. The Triratna Buddhist Community is my main context for practice

Part 1 explores what it means to ‘be a Buddhist’, focusing on the nature of the Three Jewels, and what it means to Go for Refuge to them.

Parts 2, 3, and 4 deal respectively with ethics, meditation, and wisdom. These sections explore the second declaration, asking what it means not just to think of ourselves as Buddhists, but to put this into practice in our life. Although the second declaration focuses particularly on the practice of the Precepts, we are assuming that most mitras who take this course will be practicing all aspects of the Threefold Path to some degree.

The aim of the first three sessions of Part 5 is to help people understand the relationship between Triratna and the wider Buddhist tradition, to describe our particular approach to the Dharma, and to explain why it is as it is. Part 5 also includes four sessions on devotional practice.

A more detailed session-by-session outline of the course can be found along with the course material.

The texts

The course consists of four types of text:

1. Material by Sangharakshita. Usually this has been edited and condensed to produce a text that focuses concisely on one topic. Sometimes material on the same subject from different sources has been combined.
2. Material by other Order members. Again this has often been condensed, and on a few occasions extra material has been added.
3. Canonical texts.

4. Material that has been purpose-written for the course.

Texts often come with an introduction that puts them in context. They usually come with questions for reflection and discussion. Many texts are also accompanied by ‘Suggestions for the Study Leader’. These make what we hope are helpful suggestions about how to tackle the topic, pitfalls to be avoided, and so on. If the subject seems straightforward there are no ‘Suggestions’.

The approach to study

Usually the best way to structure the session will be to discuss the questions at the end of the text one-by one, making sure as far as possible that everybody says something about each question. Usually this structured approach will be more rewarding than a freestyle discussion, and it ensures that people talk about each of the major points in the text.

We suggest that you ask the mitras to write down a brief answer to each question and bring it to the session. Many of the texts are quite short, so this is not an onerous task, and it ensures that people reflect on the material, and don’t just speed-read it at the last minute.

Sometimes a different approach is recommended for a particular session. If so it is described in the ‘Suggestions for the Study Leader.’ Sometimes the mitras are asked to take some action, such as to reflect or practice in a particular way in the week leading up to the session. To be able to join in with this – and not to feel caught-out at the last minute – it would help if you read the material in advance.

Length of the sessions and the course

It is assumed you’ll have a 2 ½ hr session to discuss each text, minus a tea break and maybe a brief introductory ritual, such as chanting the Refuges and Precepts. Where people have tried to include a period of meditation as a part of such an evening they have often felt that there wasn’t always time to discuss the text properly, and ended up spending more than a week on some sessions. This isn’t a problem if you’re willing to take more than the (arbitrary) year the course is supposed to last.

Even with a full session it can sometimes seem difficult to do justice to all the questions. In this case you may sometimes want to just discuss the questions that seem most important to you – they are there to help, not to be a straightjacket. The course consists of 35 sessions, so if want to do one topic a week and finish in a year that leaves 17 weeks – about one week in three – for breaks, pujas, meditation evenings, reporting in sessions, meeting socially, and so on. This might sound a lot, but in practice some people may find it fairly tight. Again there is no problem about spending slightly more than a year on the course, but it’s best to plan this in advance and tell the mitras.

Thanks again for offering to lead the course. We hope it's a fruitful experience for you. If you have any questions or comments about the content please send these to:

vadanya@btinternet.com

If you have any questions or comments about the online implementation of the course, please send these to:

candrasa@freebuddhistaudio.com

Week 1 – Dharma Study as a Spiritual Practice

Text: ‘Talking the Dharma’

(Based on a talk called ‘Talking the Dharma’, by Padmavajra, with some added material.)

Suggestions for the study leader

This text is designed to be read aloud, with pauses for discussion every paragraph or so. (The Introduction, in italics, should also be read in this way.) This approach seems appropriate for the first week of the course, as it does not require any preparation beforehand, and the act of reading may help to break the ice, involving all the group members in the process.

The text includes a lot of useful material about making study a practice. In particular it could be very helpful to get people to think about the roles and reactions they habitually get into in groups like this, and perhaps to revisit this discussion after a few weeks.

Week 5 – The Mythic Buddha

Question 1

This text gives an opportunity to get out of the rational realm for a while and explore the world of what Sangharakshita calls poetic truth. Probably we will need to open up this topic with a discussion of what he means by poetic or mythic truth, and whether it really is as important as he says. This may be a new and challenging idea for some people.

Questions 2 and 3

Having opened up the subject of myth, archetypes, and poetic truth, a purely rational discussion of this material might not be the best approach. On the other hand an exploration of how folk respond imaginatively to the incidents described, perhaps bringing in some art which depicts them if at all possible, should make for an interesting session. I suggest that most of the evening could focus on Questions 2 and 3, with the participants talking about which incidents mean something to them, and perhaps also showing some art they have found. To make this work you will probably need to draw people’s attention to these questions and suggestions the week before, so that they are primed to read the text well in advance and follow up on it.

It might help if, as the leader, you are prepared to start this discussion off by talking about what one of the archetypal incidents in the Buddha’s life means to you. Bringing some art would also help. (Buddhist art books often have representations of these incidents, there are also illustrations in the Guide to the

Buddhist Path, from which the text is taken, and of course the web is a rich source of images).

A note for those into Jungian psychology

Bhante's original talk ends with a discussion that equates Mara, the Earth Goddess, Brahma and Mucalinda to four Jungian archetypes – the Shadow, the Anima, the Wise Old Man, and the Young Hero. This was originally included in the text, but user experience with new mitras was not always positive.

When Bhante gave this talk Jungian psychology was very fashionable; most of his audience would know something about it and think favourably of it. But this is not always the case with people from later generations, who have not always come across it, or, if they have a background in academic psychology, may even regard it as discredited and old-hat.

This course is mainly about the Buddha Dharma, not Jungian psychology; the mythic episodes in the Buddha's life story speak for themselves; a lengthy discussion of Jungian psychology would only distract from the main purpose of the session; and it does not seem right to expect all study leaders to be able to explain Jung's theories, or to defend them to people who know more about psychology than they do. For all these reasons the Jungian material has been edited out; but of course this has met with protests from those who think it should be in.

If the Jungian material was part of the 'official' text, people could hardly avoid discussing it; whereas if it is left out those who want to can add it back. So if you feel that it is important, and you want to discuss it, please distribute it separately to your group. It's in *Guide to the Buddhist Path*, in the last two-and-a-bit pages of the text – page numbers vary according to the edition.

Week 6 – The Buddha (4): The Buddha We Can Contact

I suggest starting the session with the group reading Pingiya's Praises of the Way to the Beyond, from the Sutta Nipata, aloud. This will help vary the format of the sessions, and it will provide a good warm-up for the discussion. (As with other sessions, it is important that people study the introductory material in italics as well, as this puts the Pali Canon text in context.)

How we handle the rest of the session will depend on the group's reaction to this material, and on the leader's (ie your) preferences. If most of the group are open to a devotional response to the Buddha, it might be good to include some devotional practice or meditation centered on Shakyamuni. (For those that want them, a puja and a short guided visualisation are supplied. Use these if you want.) [To be changed if we don't want the puja etc.]

However, some groups at this level may include enough rationalists or anti-devotionalists to make this inappropriate. In which case the questions provided at

the end of the texts may provide a way to structure the discussion, to help such folk to appreciate the potential benefits of a devotional response to the Buddha.

Week 7 – The Dharma (1): The Basic Analysis – Our Disease, and the Prescription for a Cure

Some people have difficulty with the teaching of the Four Noble Truths because they are not aware of much dukkha in their lives. In the rich societies of the West it is possible for some people to live in a god realm, for a while, and as long as someone is in this realm the First and Second Truths are not going to sound very compelling. There are others who do experience a degree of dukkha, but deny this to themselves and others in the interest of their self image. (Only losers are unhappy.) In neither case is their much point in telling someone that they experience suffering or dissatisfaction if that is not their conscious experience.

With both sorts of people it might be worth pointing out that the very fact that they are interested in the Dharma means that they feel something is missing in their (otherwise very good) lives – otherwise why bother? Such people often say that they are not motivated by dukkha, and that their lives are good, but that they want to make them even better. We could point out that this is a perfectly good motivation for practising the Dharma, and is itself a response to a subtle form of dukkha, or dissatisfaction.

Before discussing this material it might be a good idea to make sure you are familiar with Sangharakshita's teachings on the difference between healthy desire and neurotic craving, and on *kama chanda* and *Dharma chanda*. It could also help to give some thought to what you think is the difference between a liberating transcendence of self-centred craving and its near enemies. It is not uncommon for people to interpret "going beyond self-centred craving" as a form of self-martyrdom, and either to react against the idea, or to apply it in a way that is anything but liberating.

People who perhaps need to develop more straightforward assertiveness often feel that they give too little attention to their own desires, and spend too much time satisfying the expectations of others. They may feel that what they need to focus on is satisfying their own needs, and in their own case, at the moment, they may possibly be right. (Alternatively their thinking may just be the result of exposure to the world of psychotherapy, which tends to emphasise satisfying one's own needs, rather than self-transcendence.) Well, we did point out in the introduction to this session that people at different stages of development may need different teachings, and that no one expression of the Dharma, perhaps not even the Four Noble Truths, can suit people at all stages.

Week 9 – The Sangha (1): The Sangha as a Means of Development

Here are some ideas about some of the questions on Meghiya:

1. What can we deduce about Meghiya's character from this story?

Meghiya does not know himself very well. When he goes off alone he is completely surprised to discover that his mind is full of negative thoughts and emotions – “It is strange” etc . He does not know what his own mind and heart are like. Not knowing himself is an aspect of his lack of integration – the first stage in Sangharakshita’s description of the process of development.

Meghiya seems to feel no loyalty or gratitude to the Buddha, so that he will not take notice of a simple request from him. Lacking loyalty and gratitude to even such an admirable and likeable person as the Buddha, it is unlikely that he is metta-ful or considerate towards other less exalted beings. Lacking such positive emotion, Meghiya also has some work to do on the second stage of Sangharakshita’s system.

Because Meghiya is unintegrated and does not know himself, he thinks he is more advanced than he is. Meghiya is also impatient - he can’t wait a few days, even when the Buddha asks him to. Not knowing himself and being impatient, he does not see the point of following a path of regular steps. He wants to go straight to the end of the path, so he tries to practice at an inappropriately advanced level. He is not yet ready for a lot of solitary meditation.

Meghiya’s basic attitude is individualistic and selfish. He grasps at personal meditative achievement, and ignores the wellbeing of others - the Buddha in this case! - and the wider wellbeing of the Sangha he depends upon. (What would the wider effects have been if something had happened to the Buddha? Presumably the Buddha had a reason for asking Meghiya to stay with him.)

Meghiya seems to see the spiritual life as entirely about meditation. He does not seem to see it as a rounded, multidimensional process of development requiring a range of practices, in which other people play an essential part. (Which would you rather do, meditate alone or practice with the Buddha? I know which I would choose!)

Some of these points are brought out in the remaining questions.

2. Why do you think that Meghiya is plagued by unskilful thoughts when he is alone in the mango grove?

The answer comes from the previous question: he lacks integration and positive emotion, his motivation is selfish, and he is grasping impatiently at achievement.

3. Why is he so surprised by this? Why didn't this happen when he was with the Buddha?

He is surprised because he doesn’t know himself.

Meghiya obviously has a lot of negative *samskaras* , but he is in positive states when he is with the Buddha because we are all profoundly influenced by the conditions we are in and the people we are with. In positive circumstances our hindrances and negative tendencies can cease to operate and lie dormant. A lesson

we can point out from this is that while we are in good situations (on retreat, living in a community, being with spiritual friends etc) we “fly with borrowed wings.” If we think our good state is of our own making, and change our circumstances so that we are no longer supported in our practice, we are likely to crash-land.

The rest of the questions need no comment.

Part 2 – Ethics

Week 2 – The First Precept: Expressing Interconnectedness

Beware. On page 3, under the heading ‘practical considerations’, Bhante says “Observance of the First Precept will naturally result in one’s ...refusing to have oneself, or to assist or encourage others in having, an abortion.” Reactions to this sentence can dominate or derail a study group. It has been left in to stay true to what Bhante had to say, but if you don’t want it to completely dominate the discussion, then you may have to give some thought to how you are going to handle this. This is an emotive issue for many people. For example a social worker in one group said that they had come across a case of a 13 year old rape victim whose whole future life would have been ruined unless she was allowed an abortion – who are we to say she should not have it? This is a difficult argument to answer.

The key to keeping discussion of this issue within sensible bounds probably lies in making the following point strongly: we are talking about our own personal ethics here, not about the laws on abortion, or abortion as a social or political issue. We are not laying down rules for others, especially others in tragic circumstances like those above. The precept is about the choices we make for ourselves, as responsible, competent adults. If we choose to have an abortion, or encourage a partner to have one, because a baby would be inconvenient for us, then we are giving priority to our own desires over the life of another being. However there may be all sorts of other circumstances involved, including issues about the health of the mother, and as with any ethical guideline we can’t really make a blanket rule that covers all cases.

Week 4 – The Third Precept: From Craving to Contentment

This text was written by a man. In the area of sexual craving – just one fairly brief aspect – this may mean that the content is sometimes gender-specific. If you are a woman leading a group of women mitras, please accept and pass on our apologies for any gender bias. You may also find it useful to read the following comments on leading this session, written for women by a woman. You might even want to distribute this to your group, so that they can read it alongside the text and think about it beforehand.

An introduction for women's mitra group leaders

by Vajratara

Having piloted Vadanya's material for the mitra course in Sheffield with women mitras, I wanted to give an introduction for women's mitra group leaders highlighting the areas that my group found gender specific, written for men by a man, and offering suggestions of what might be appropriate and useful to discuss in those areas.

Most of the text my group found helpful and stimulating, applicable to both men and women. However, in the area of sex we found that the issues relevant to us as women were sometimes different than made explicit by the text.

The first issue we came across was that in the area of 'Not harming others', it wasn't just a case of 'entering into unequal relationships where the partner has expectations we have no intention of fulfilling', but in entering into unequal relationships where we have expectations that are unlikely to be fulfilled. In my group in particular, but perhaps for women more generally, it is a big and important step for them to not only realise, but take responsibility for what their expectations are in a relationship, and to communicate that in an appropriate way. All of us in our group had at some time not been honest about our motivation for entering into a relationship and had tried to hide our expectations from our partner in order to be liked and not to cause a problem, and this had led to a great deal of disappointment and hurt to both parties.

The second issue was one of 'guarding the gates of the senses'. Our group felt that using sexual fantasies and sexual stimulation as a way of distracting ourselves from our experience was not as big an area as using romantic fantasies as a way of distracting ourselves from our experience. Again it goes back to the different expectations of a relationship that women seem to often have. Rather than preoccupying ourselves with sex as a basic biological drive, our group more often glorified the romantic idyll and hankered after being in the perfect emotional set up. Watching soppy romantic films and reading sensationalist women's magazines are some of the ways in which we encourage this glorification, and which undermine our contentment with our present circumstances by offering a simplistic and sentimental view of sexual relationships.

Obviously everyone is different and will respond to the material in different ways, and you cannot always categorise men and women's responses, but it might be worthwhile if you are running a women's group to discuss those areas in addition to the ones that Vadanya has highlighted.

Introduction for the study leader

For some people the idea of studying about meditation can seem absurd – surely the time would be better spent meditating? There is an element of truth in this, and if we want to help our group have a more effective meditation practice we will need to supplement the material in this section with a more experiential approach, unless they are getting this somewhere else. This may mean we will want to spend more than 6 weeks on this section of the course.

But there is a point in a conceptual approach to meditation. For one thing it helps to know why we meditate. If we are looking for the wrong thing – maybe just a nice relaxed dreamy state – we will constantly try to steer in the wrong direction, and we will not be receptive to the real benefits. It also helps to know something about the language of meditation, so that we can think clearly about our practice, and talk about it to others – both of which we need to do to stay on track.

So for the first two sessions of this section of the course we will look at texts that give an overview of the place of meditation in the spiritual life, firstly from a traditional Pali Canon point of view, and secondly from a more contemporary Triratna perspective. This is followed by two excerpts from Kamalashila's book, dealing mainly with the Hindrances and the Dhyanas. The last two sessions are devoted to a fairly hands-on discussion of the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana, condensed from Bodhipaksa's *Wildmind*.

Week 1: The Samannaphala Sutta – On the Fruits of the Homeless Life

Introduction: why this Sutta?

To open this section on meditation we will be looking at an edited excerpt from the Samannaphala Sutta, for two reasons.

Firstly the Sutta gives a clear overview of the Threefold Path, and shows how meditation fits in. It shows that meditation is part of a process of spiritual growth that culminates in clear vision and liberation, and that practicing ethics and making changes to the way we live are integral parts of this process. It brings out the changes to our emotions and attitudes that are necessary for meditation to be effective, and how these are related to what we do outside meditation. So it provides a convincing justification for the Threefold Path, shows that we shouldn't treat meditation as a stand-alone practice separate from the rest of the Dharma, and brings home the importance of preparing ourselves for meditation by developing positive emotions and attitudes. Secondly, the Sutta also brings out the four elements of Bhante's 'system of meditation', although not in the usual order. (The way it does this is pointed out in the study notes that follow.) This provides a link to the discussion of the system of meditation in the next session, and shows that the 'system' is describing some fundamental truths about the process of

spiritual development, which are clearly present in the traditional description of the Threefold Path. This makes it clear that there is no conflict between the Threefold Path model and Bhante's system, but that they are different ways of looking at the same process. (The fact that the sutta does not bring out the four parts of Bhante's system in the usual order should not be a problem – the four aspects of the system obviously don't happen neatly one after the other, but are all parts of a complex process.)

Study suggestions

It is suggested that you ask the group to read the sutta aloud bit by bit, bringing out the important points as you go, using the accompanying study notes if you find them helpful. You may like to bring out the four parts of Bhante's system as they occur in the Sutta (they are highlighted in bold in the study suggestions) writing them on a flipchart, then refer back to them during the next session on Bhante's 'system.'

Study notes:

Verse 1: The 'going forth' is a spiritual death, the death of the old person, who leaves his old identity and role completely behind, and even changes his appearance and perhaps name to mark this death.

Q: Why is this important.

(Our normal circumstances, our role, our friends and relatives, even the place we live tend to keep us in our old habits and identity. The easiest way to change is to change our environment and the people we mix with. We can't become something new unless we leave the old behind.)

Q: We probably are not up for the radical 'going forth' the Buddha describes, but how can we get some of this?

(Depends on circumstances; leaving unskilful acquaintances behind, spending more time with Buddhists; spending time on retreat is a good way of changing environment for a time, and can help free us from our habits and patterns.)

It might be worth pointing out that the people the Buddha was talking about were not 'monks', they were homeless wanderers who begged for their food – a much more radical and challenging lifestyle, that called for a much more radical death to personal likes and dislikes. I have kept the misleading word monk in the translation for conciseness.

Verse 3: 'Trembling for the welfare of all living beings.' This brings out the importance of positive emotion. It also brings out that ethics is about cultivating positive emotion, not about sticking to the letter of a set of rules, and that concern for the wellbeing of others is ideally part of our motivation for practicing.

Q: Why is positive emotion, and concern for others in particular, needed to meditate effectively and develop wisdom?

(Suggestions: If we are just concerned with ourselves it is impossible to leave ourselves as we currently are behind; metta and compassion are the emotional counterparts of wisdom, especially the wisdom of interconnectedness; while we are still focussed on ourselves we are stuck in a very cramped and restricting vision of reality; we see more clearly through the spectacles of positive emotion, and there is no real insight without it.)

Verse 4 : ‘...that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side... He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality.’

Q: Why does being ethical free us from anxiety and a sense of danger?

(Note the reference to a king, contrasting the peace of mind of the spiritual practitioner with the troubled mind of the king.)

Verse 5: Q: Why might guarding the gates of the senses help us in our meditation practice?

(If we spend the time when we aren't meditating stoking the fires of our sense desire, we are unlikely to be able to switch this off when on the cushion.)

Verse 8: Q: Would the monk be able to meditate effectively if he took himself off to his solitary lodging while still subject to distraction and discontent? What would he probably experience if he did?

(Maybe tell the story of Meghiya.)

Verse 9 to 15: Dealing with the Five Hindrances.

The first thing the monk has to do to meditate is to get beyond the hindrances. Point out that one session of the course will deal with these hindrances, and how we get beyond them.

Q: How might the ethical practice the monk has already undertaken help him get beyond the hindrances?

Verse 16: We could point out that the monk does not need any complex techniques to meditate: as a result of the positive emotions and contentment he has developed from ethical practice, as soon as he leaves the hindrances behind he moves into the dhyanas, by a spontaneous process of positive conditionality.

Q: If he is already in such a good state, e.g. trembling for the welfare of all beings and completely contented, how could he still be subject to the hindrances of sense desire and ill-will?

(I don't have an answer for that one, except perhaps that when we have no distractions deeper levels of our being get activated, so that ill-will for example that was not activated when living a structured life surrounded by spiritual friends might come to the surface when trying to meditate in solitude.)

Verse 16 to 23: The first four dhyanas. Point out that one session of the course will look at the dhyanas in more detail. (Alternatively you could choose to use this text to look at the dhyanas now, taking longer over it, and leave out the later text.)

Q: What are people's responses to the descriptions of the dhyanas, and the traditional images. Do they sound like a fruit of spiritual practice that is worth striving for? Have people had any experiences resembling these, and if so what were the circumstances that gave rise to this?

Verse 18: '...gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind.' Ethical practice and meditation bring integration – oneness of mind – and the absence of inner conflict we get from integration makes tranquillity easier to achieve.

Verses 24: The ultimate goal of meditation is insight into reality, hence the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Note the analogy of clear, sharp vision, seeing something beautiful as though it was in the palm of your hand. As usual with the Pali Canon there is little conceptual description of the content of this insight, and what there is could sound quite negative, so I thought it would be better to focus on the analogy of seeing a gem. It might be worth pointing out that Insight is indescribable in words, and we shouldn't mistake any rational statements for the content of Insight. Incidentally, I have cut a lot of less rationalist stuff from the post-dhyana part of the text, in the interest of conciseness, and because some of it might sound too whacky for some newish people – this includes verses about psychic powers, seeing former births and so on. However you might like to refer to this to show that insight is not just a nihilistic materialist rationalism.

Verse 25: The 'mind-made body.' We probably can't be sure what this was getting at, but it is a good image for spiritual rebirth: a new person is born out of the old, as the snake sheds its skin as it grows. (I suspect that the word for body here could have a much wider meaning than in the English, as in 'Dharmakaya', where clearly a physical body is not meant – it could mean something more like 'being'.) At this point we could bring out that the practitioner by now is a very different person from the one who originally cut off his beard and donned the yellow robes. Following the death of the old worldly personality, the former householder was first reborn in the role of homeless renunciant, and then gradually reborn in the inner sense as a completely different sort of being altogether. The whole sutta has been describing a process of spiritual rebirth.

Week 2 – The Triratna System of Meditation

Here are a few suggestions for dealing with some of the questions at the end of the text:

1. ‘All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address.’ Do you agree with this statement? What symptoms would we expect to see in someone for whom it was true? What would someone who had what Sangharakshita describes as ‘true individuality’ be like?

(An unintegrated person would make resolutions and not carry them out; they would have no one overriding aim in their life, but might swing from one enthusiasm to another; they would tend to experience doubt, conflict and anxiety a lot of the time; they would find commitment to anything over a long term difficult; they would lack directed energy and find it difficult to achieve much; they might find that they seem to undermine themselves, because they are not aware of their unconscious motivations; they would not ‘walk their talk’. An integrated person would exhibit the opposite characteristics, and in particular it might be worth emphasising that they would not experience inner conflict or anxiety, and would have a lot more free energy than most people.)

2. Why might the Mindfulness of Breathing help us to integrate the different parts of ourselves and develop more individuality?

(The practice helps us become aware of what is going on in our minds, making our unconscious motivations more conscious, and allowing the different parts of ourselves to get to know each other; the act of choosing to focus on one object has a unifying effect; the practice may put us more in touch with our own ‘heights’ (vertical integration) which gives the conflicting parts of our lower personality something to unite around.)

3. ‘I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals.’ Do you agree? Why, or why not?

(It might help to ask whether we can imagine someone who is ‘spiritually developed’ but also unfriendly, joyless, agitated, indecisive, and so on. Also to get folk to come up with examples of people they think are ‘developed’, and talk about the sort of emotions they seem to embody. The development of positive emotion is not so much ‘crucial to personal development’ as an essential and integral part of personal development. Changing how we feel and what we will are just as much parts of spiritual development as changing how we see the world.)

4. What is your emotional response to the idea of spiritual death? Do you think there might be a connection between spiritual death and Insight into the true nature of reality?

(An important aspect of Insight is seeing that we never existed as a separate entity in the first place – it is therefore a kind of death.)

5. How do you respond to the idea of visualisation practice? Do you think there could be a connection between visualisation practice and the development of a ‘mind-made body’ described in the text we looked at last week?

(Maybe the ‘mind-made body’ is a visualised new self, in which case we might see here the seeds of some Vajrayana practices in the Pali Canon? Or maybe it is the self we have consciously made for ourselves through our practice, in contrast to the conditioned self made by circumstances?)

6. In this text and the last one we looked at two different descriptions of the process of spiritual growth. Do you think these are in conflict with one another? Are there any similarities? Which do you think is most applicable to your own situation?

(It might help to look at the Suggestions for the last session. The stages of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth are all clearly present in the path as described in last week’s Sutta. However the path described there is specifically that of the homeless renunciant, whereas these stages can also be practiced in other lifestyles, although maybe the effects won’t be as fast or dramatic.)

Week 4 – Meditative States

(Text condensed from Meditation, by Kamalashila, Chapter 4)

General points

Some people think it is a good idea to give an attractive description of dhyana, as this has a motivating effect, and because many people will already have some experience of access and dhyana, either in or out of meditation. Others however think it is a bad idea, as it may set up unrealistic expectations, give the impression that meditation when we don’t get into dhyana is not ‘the real thing’, create a goal-orientated mindset, and discourage people who don’t experience any dhyana.

When he wrote this text Kamalashila was obviously coming from the first point of view. If we don’t describe the positive things that can happen when we meditate, why would anyone bother? And if we don’t help people to connect their previous experiences of concentrated happy states with what they are aiming for in meditation, we will be cutting them off from a valuable resource.

However we need to be aware of the dangers of this approach, and do what we can about them. We could point out that we can’t will ourselves into dhyana, but that this is the result of a natural process; all we can do is to set up the conditions and allow the process to happen, and wilful striving isn’t helpful. We can make the point that meditations in which we don’t get into dhyana and instead battle with

the hindrances can be very productive. We can help people to understand that because they don't yet have experience of dhyana, this doesn't mean it isn't real: other people experience it, and so can they – what stops them is not that they are 'bad' meditators, but the conditions of their life.

Suggestions on the discussion questions:

1. "It's almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different 'selves'." Do you agree? Can you recognise and maybe give a name to some of your main 'selves'?

(Another idea here would be to get people to draw some of their different subpersonalities.)

2. Have you ever experienced anything like the 'higher states' described in the text – especially access concentration and the first dhyana – either in or out of meditation?

(Questions to draw people out might include the following. Have you got to a point in meditation, or doing something else, where concentration seems to become effortless? Have you got to a point where the usual mental chatter seems to drop away and you seem to step into a new space? Have you experienced any physical thrills – like goosepimples or shivers up the spine – either when meditating, or maybe when out in nature, listening to music, or doing something else you enjoy? Have you experienced rushes of positive emotion under any of these circumstances, or a sense of reverence, or maybe a desire to cry? Have you ever felt inspired when focussed on doing something creative, so that ideas seem to come into your mind almost from outside?)

3. If your answer to Q2 was "yes", when did this happen, and what were the conditions that contributed to your experience?

(Many people mention being in nature, focussing on something beautiful, using the senses rather than paying attention to the discursive mind, and rhythmic physical activity, such as walking or swimming. Others are feeling good about ourselves – hence ethics – and being in a state that isn't too stirred up by anxiety and hurry.)

4. If your answer to Q2 was "no", do you accept that people can and do experience these states? If you compare your life to the life described by the Buddha in the first text of this part of the course, can you see any factors in your lifestyle that might be stopping you entering states of deep concentration?

(One aim of this question is to help people realise that they may not experience concentrated states because of their lifestyle, and that they can do something about it. Factors in the lifestyle described by the Buddha in the Samannaphala Sutta include having a simple life with few artificial cares, low levels of input, living an ethical existence that does away with low self-esteem and guilt, having time to be

quiet and allow the mind to settle, having opportunities for solitude, and being surrounded by sources of positive emotion and inspiration, such as spiritual friends and the beauty of nature.

Likely blocking factors for many people include excessive input from the media and so on, constant activity and hurry, being surrounded by ugly environments or negative people, and unethical habits. Some people may be willing to take on precepts about some of this, eg to watch less TV, walk wherever possible, spend time in nature, give themselves solitude and quiet time, and so on.

Probably the most helpful thing people can be encouraged to do is to go on retreat – to spend at least some time in an environment a bit like the one the Buddha describes.)

5. Go back and look at the way the Buddha describes the dhyanas –or jhanas – in the first text of this section. Can you relate the way the Buddha describes them to the descriptions in the text?

(Pretty obvious.)

6. “By developing one of the positive features of dhyana, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances.” What qualities are the opposite of each of the five hindrances? What qualities do you think need to be present in a state of meditative awareness? Are they the same? Which positive factor tends to be most lacking in your experience of meditation, and how might you cultivate it?

(An approach that can be more accessible than the traditional dhyana factors is to think of the opposites of the hindrances, and relate these to the positive features of the meditative state. In meditation we want to experience:

- a) contentment
- b) metta
- c) alertness/energy
- d) calm
- e) commitment

People may find it helpful to decide on which of these they need most, then develop ways for developing the positive quality in their meditation, and also in everyday life. Of course this is just ‘working with the hindrances’ by cultivating the opposite, but it puts a more positive slant on it.)

Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Ways of Thinking

Week 2 – Conditionality and Karma

Most of the questions are self-explanatory.

Question 3 is designed to make people think, and to bring out the fact that the niyamas aren't completely separate, but overlap and interact. If it any help here is my attempt at answering it.

A meteorite drops on Fred's car. (Physical/inorganic.)

To buy another car he takes a highly paid but stressful job. (Karmic cause.)

Due to stress his resistance drops and he gets a cold. (Psychological cause leading to biological effect.)

While ill he stops meditating, and gets out of the habit. (Biological cause conditioning a karmic action.)

His old irritability reappears, and he has a row with his partner. (Karmic effect.)

In a temper about the row, he walks into a low doorway, and knocks himself out. (Karmic effect.)

While out cold he has a vision of Avalokitesvara, who point out how stupid he is being. (Dharmic level intervention?)

He apologises to his partner and starts meditating again. (Karmic.)

Of course it's more complicated than that.

Week 3 – The Wheel of Life

Notes on the questions:

Question 1: Perhaps obviously, this points to the difference between 'hate types' and 'greed types.' Seeing the extent to which we lean towards one or other of these poles can be a valuable step forward in self-knowledge; so helping people to do a bit of self-examination here could be worthwhile. Here are some ideas about the characteristics of the two types:

Greed types:

- Create a pleasant environment for themselves
- Eat slowly, savouring their food

- In discussion, prioritise keeping harmony over getting at the truth
- When thinking about the day ahead, tend to focus on what might be enjoyable
- Are patient and placid, (as long as they aren't deprived of pleasure for too long)
- Tend to notice what they agree with in texts, and may be gullible
- Tend to notice what they like in people
- Feel content when there is nothing that needs doing, but may get lazy
- Find it easier to develop metta than wisdom

Hate types:

- Are in too much of a hurry to create a pleasant environment
- Eat quickly, to get on to the next thing
- In discussion, prioritise getting at the truth over keeping harmony
- When thinking about the day ahead, tend to focus on the unpleasant things that might happen
- Tend to be impatient and irritated by obstacles
- Tend to notice what they disagree with in texts, and may be sceptical
- Tend to notice what they don't like in people
- Feel discontented when there is nothing that needs doing, wanting a challenge
- Find it easier to develop wisdom than metta

Obviously that's a caricature, and it's much more complex than that. You will no doubt have your own ideas, but the above may help some people to get a discussion going.

Question 4: We might need to bring out here that spending time in the god realms – say by enjoying the dhyanas, or the arts – is no bad thing, and can be a valuable part of our path, as long as we don't get too attached to 'blissful' states, or see this as the purpose of the spiritual life. Some people whose experience of life has been very unpleasant no doubt benefit a great deal from a few visits to the god realms, and perhaps we shouldn't discourage them from getting pleasure say from meditation, even if this takes a rather self-indulgent, bliss-bunny form for a while.

Question 5: The idea behind this question is to get people to connect with just how intense our vedanas can be, and therefore why it can be so hard not to react to them. We might get people to think about what it feels like when, for example, we are sexually or romantically attracted to someone; when someone criticises or blames us harshly; when we experience loss or disappointment; when we are embarrassed or shamed; when we are anxious or frightened; and so on.

Question 6: We might be able to bring out here that we usually have to face down some unpleasant vedanas for a while to be creative, but in the longer term the results feel highly positive. (The path starts with dukkha.)

Week 4 – Spiritual Growth and Creative Conditionality

How to talk about ‘The Unconditioned’?:

In this text and in other parts of this ‘Wisdom’ section, Sangharakshita uses terms like ‘The Unconditioned’ as an important part of his exposition, saying things like:

“So faith in the Buddhist sense means the placing of one's heart on the Unconditioned, on the Absolute, rather than on the conditioned.”

or

“...piercing through the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned, you see the perfectly satisfying nature of the Unconditioned.”

Some people will find it hard to relate to this language – after all, how do we imagine or get our head round something as vague-sounding as ‘The Unconditioned’? Some people may even react to these terms as having theistic overtones.

However Sangharakshita has been clear that we need to have an idea of something completely beyond our present understanding and experience. For example in ‘The Survey’ p36 he says:

“Much less can we agree that someone who refuses to accept the existence of a transcendental Principle, whether in the Buddhistic sense or some other way, can ever hope to understand a doctrine whose sole concern is with the realization of such a Principle. It may even be said that a student belonging to a non-Buddhist tradition which affirms the existence of a spiritual world beyond the physical senses and the mind, in however crude and exclusive a form...has sometimes a better chance of understanding the Dharma than a conscientiously impartial person who has no belief in the reality of such a world.”

One approach to dealing with this with sceptical mitras might be to say something like:

“Using meaningless words like ‘The Unconditioned’ or ‘The Transcendental’ is a way of pointing to something we can’t understand rationally, which is beyond our present experience. Yes, there is a theoretical danger that we will reify ‘The Transcendental’ into God, but there is a much greater danger that we will try to reduce the Dharma to something that can be contained within a basically nihilistic 19th Century Rationalist Materialism, which is the worldview most of us have been indoctrinated with.”

Terms like ‘The Unconditioned’ remind us that there is something beyond – which we can only get glimpses of through intuition – while leaving its nature completely undefined, as it needs to be to avoid eternalism. However some Order members have a problem with this language. If that is you, in case anyone picks up on this aspect and wants to go into it, you might need to think about how you can present this aspect of Sangharakshita’s approach to the Dharma, but without being dishonest to yourself.

Suggestions about specific questions

Question 1: Some people – usually the most able and successful – don’t like the idea that they might be in any way ‘unhappy’, as they associate this with being a ‘loser’. Such folk will tend to say that they were happy before they started practising, but that they wanted ‘something more’. They will tend to see the spiritual life as a positive process of looking for greater fulfilment, rather than a negative process of escaping from unhappiness. Fair enough, but they can probably be helped to see that this wanting ‘something more’ is itself a form of dissatisfaction – if they were perfectly satisfied, they wouldn’t want anything more. However for them it might be easier to think of the ‘voice’ as whispering ‘there’s something more’, rather than ‘you’re not really happy’.

Question 3: The usual list of things that increase people’s shraddha might include meditation, retreats, reading and studying the Dharma, contact with fellow Buddhists, and spiritual friendship. If the first step on the path is shraddha, perhaps the most important aspect of practice is to do the things that nurture it! However the question is also getting at a more general point. Many people observe that they experience more shraddha when they are in a good mental state, while negative states and unethical living tend to erode shraddha and encourage sceptical doubt. The point might be drawn out that shraddha is an integral part of positive mental and emotional states – it is a feature of being spiritually healthy – and that it is therefore a sort of clear-seeing in its own right, like a prefiguration of insight. So our sceptical doubt is a form of distorted vision arising from negative mental states, not the rational clarity that some people think!

Question 7: There may be no ‘right’ answer to this question. But how about:

Ethics: Dukkha, faith, joy;

Meditation: Rapture, calm, bliss, samadhi;

Wisdom: All the rest from ‘Knowledge and Vision’ onwards.

Week 5 – The Conditioned and the Unconditioned

Comments on the questions

Question 1: This is how Sangharakshita describes The Unconditioned on page 2 paragraph 3, under the heading ‘The Unconditioned.’ We might bring out the point that The Unconditioned is not just ‘inapprehensible’ – ie inconceivable – it is also a ‘plenitude’; ie it is not a blank emptiness or a merely abstract principle, but it is “a radiant spiritual reality” (Sangharakshita) full of positive qualities.

Question 2: Other examples I can think of include the following. No doubt you can think of more – the list is almost endless:

- Apparent pleasures that cause suffering for other beings
- Enjoying wealth whose creation involved exploiting others
- Using products produced by people working in harsh conditions, eg in ‘developing’ countries
- Using, consuming, or owning things whose production or use damages the environment – ie just about anything we buy

Apparent pleasures that cause anxiety because they may be taken away:

- Wealth
- Power
- Status
- Fame
- Health
- Just about all sensory pleasures!

Apparent pleasures that bind us to something that causes suffering:

- Drug and alcohol use
- ‘Neurotic’ sexual relationships
- Consumer lifestyles, which require us to work constantly and subject ourselves to stress to earn money

Question 4: The aim of this question is: (a) to bring out that facing up the inevitable element of suffering in life helps us be happy and fulfilled – trying to

run away from it or distract ourselves just makes it worse, whereas when we face it isn't usually that bad;

and (b) to bring out that seeing that conditioned things can't give us lasting satisfaction allows us to look for happiness where it can actually be found, in spiritual development, in having a rich inner world and experiencing positive mental and emotional states; otherwise we're constantly looking for happiness where it can't be found, in outer things, which over time leads to deep unhappiness.

Question 5: The positive side of impermanence is growth and transformation. If everything were fixed and permanent, no development would be possible. Because of transience, new phenomena are constantly coming into existence, as well as going out of existence. We tend to focus on the negative aspect of impermanence because of our egocentric grasping, but if we moved beyond this we would see impermanence as positive.

Question 6: The positive side of anatman is interconnectedness. Nothing has self nature because everything is inextricably linked to everything else. Again, we can tend to see anatman as negative because of our egotism. If we really saw our interconnectedness with all other phenomena we would lose our sense of isolation, and our sense of being in conflict with other people and the world; our interactions with other beings would be characterised by metta and a sense of solidarity.

Question 7: The aim of this question is to bring out (a) that moving from the conditioned to The Unconditioned is not an escape into quietism or selfish indifference; and (b) that wisdom and compassion are two sides of the same coin.

This question could also serve as a link to the next session, which deals with the Bodhicitta.

Part 5: Buddhism and Triratna and Devotional Practice

Week 2 – Triratna and the Unity of Buddhism

Most of the questions for discussion relate to people's own experience, or else the basis for an answer is in the text. The exception is

Question 5: From your reading and study so far, can you see any examples of the tendencies explored and filled out by Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism already being present in the Buddhism described in the Pali Canon?

This might seem like a bit of an advanced question for this level, but in fact there are several examples in the material studied on this course so far. However it wouldn't be too surprising if mitras were stumped by this question, so it would be as well to have some examples ready. Here are some ideas – you can almost certainly think of others:

In the Pali Canon the Buddha taught the Brahma Viharas and frequently exhorted his followers to practice ‘for the welfare of the many’. This shows that the emphasis on altruism which became the Bodhisattva Ideal in the Mahayana was present from the start.

The approach to practice described by Pingiya in the Sutta Nipata, which was studied in Part 1, shows that a path of practice based on faith, devotion, and meditation on the Buddha was present in early Buddhism. This was then taken further by the Mahayana and Vajrayana, forming the basis for devotion to particular Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Vajrayana visualisation practices, and Pure Land practice.

The reference to the meditator creating a ‘mind-formed body’ in the Sutta on the Fruits of the Homeless Life, studied in Part 3, is suggestive of some sorts of Vajrayana practice, such as visualising the ‘subtle body’ made of light.

The parable of the raft, and the Buddha’s statement that his teachings were merely ‘a handful of leaves’ compared to the possible truth-teachings, both foreshadow the Mahayana emphasis on all teachings as skilful means.

The Pali Canon contains frequent references to meditators developing psychic powers, to communication with devas, and to miraculous acts of the Buddha. The world of the Pali canon is in many ways just as mythic and magical as the world of the Mahayana and Vajrayana, although modern Theravadins downplay this.

Week 3 – The Distinctive Emphases of Triratna

Obviously this is based on Sangharakshita’s talk on the distinctive emphases of the FWBO, although it contains more detail than the talk. However an alternative to studying this text would be to listen to the talk.

I have left out one of the ‘emphases’, ‘an equal ordination’, because I don’t think it means much to people at this level. Most mitras won’t be aware that, at least theoretically, all nuns are seen as ‘lower’ than monks in traditional schools, and drawing their attention to the fact could feel a bit uncharitable! I’m not even sure whether this is still true - I suspect many schools present in the West will have done away with this, even if it is true traditionally ‘back home’. If you disagree with me and want to mention this emphasis you will need to bring it up yourself.

Week 4 – Ritual and devotion (1): The Purpose of Ritual

Questions:

1. Becoming aware that many of our views are just a reflection of the society we have been brought up in is an important achievement, and it may be possible to help some people towards this understanding in this discussion. In our society, the words ‘empty’ and ‘ritual’ almost seem to belong together. Sangharakshita has pointed out that the attitudes of Northern European culture and its offshoots has been strongly influenced by

Protestant Christianity, which at its most extreme viewed all ritual, all images and art, and all music except leaden hymns, as somehow antithetical to spirituality. For this reason many people take it for granted that a spiritual tradition with less ritual is better than one with more. This has been reflected in the past Western preference for Zen and the Theravada, on the questionable grounds that they are less ritualistic than other schools, and therefore focus on the real essentials.

2. Some usual responses to this question, which you might use to jog people's memory, include: when alone in nature, by the sea, or watching a sunset; contemplating the night sky; when absorbed in music; when moved by art or poetry; when in a beautiful building such as a cathedral that has developed a numinous atmosphere over the centuries; in moments of danger; when someone around us dies or is facing death; and during drug experiences. We can help people to remember the times they have felt like this, encourage them to find ways of putting themselves in similar circumstances again (except the drugs – maybe meditation instead!), and help them find ways to recall these occasions during puja.
3. It might help to get people to remember their first experiences of coming to a Buddhist Centre and hearing the Dharma– many people report feeling that they felt as though they had “come home”, and as though the Dharma they heard seemed so obviously true that they felt they had always known it. These are likely to have been sraddha responses arising from intuition as much as reason. Some people say something similar about seeing an image of the Buddha.
4. There is not much to say here except to try to bring out the positive, and not just focus on the negative feelings of perhaps just one or a very few individuals, which can be the tendency in some study groups.
5. Maybe point out here that ritual need not just be done with others – for which there is often limited opportunity – but can also be brought into our private practice. This can be done in simple ways – tending our shrine, bowing to it, chanting the refuges. We can also do puja on our own before, after, or instead of meditating.

Week 5 – Ritual and devotion (2): Some devotional practices used in Triratna

Question 2: It would be help if you could provide some examples of your own here, ie think of some different examples of aspects of the Three Jewels that are meaningful for you, or aspects of your commitment to each of them, that could be linked with chanting the Refuges three times. Examples may be needed to get people's imagination going - there are a very few in the text, but the more the better.

Question 3: This question in particular may bring up people's reactions to the whole idea of devotion. Devotional gestures are no longer part of our culture; they

may seem alien, or they may remind people of rituals in other religions with which they have negative associations. So while some people may be able to say the words of a puja reasonably happily, the mere suggestion of making a physical gesture expressive of reverence may provoke resistance. Obviously we would not try to coerce anyone into bowing or using the anjali mudra if they do not want to. This would be completely counterproductive – they will probably just get used to the idea over time, and start doing it naturally. However we could try to make people think about their reactions. To any rugged individualists who think they do not serve or bow to anybody or anything, we might point out that we all serve something. (For example, most people who think they live for themselves are in fact serving the consumer society and global capitalism.) Perhaps the secret of self-esteem is to serve something worthy of service?

Question 4: An obvious thing to do this week would be to do a Threefold Puja, if time allows. This could be linked with Question 4, and with a discussion of the effects of using the body in devotional practice (Question 3). Alternatively you could do the Dedication Ceremony, dedicating the evening, or the mitra group itself.

Question 6: For example, when we go on solitary retreat, at a deep level we often know that this is a special time, and many hindrances such as sexual desire simply do not raise their head. You will probably have other examples of your own.

Week 6 – Ritual and devotion (3): The Tiratana Vandana

Perhaps the best way to engage with the Tiratana Vandana would be to start by reading it through in translation line by line, and relating this to the Pali, using the study text for reference. You could also listen to the chant, which can be downloaded from Free Buddhist Audio:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=38>

Then you may want to help your group learn the chant. In this case you will not have time to discuss the questions, but you may feel that this is a more appropriate approach to a devotional text than a wordy discussion.

However, the easiest way to learn a chant is to hear it over and over again in the midst of a group of people who already know it – I imagine that is how most of us learnt the Tiratana Vandana . Chanting with a group who are all starting from scratch could be difficult and even embarrassing for some people – so don't take this on without thinking about it if you have never taught a group to chant it before. It would help if some of the group already know it, or if you can get some more experienced supporters.

You may decide to cover the questions as well as, or instead of, learning the chant. They speak for themselves.

Week 7 – Ritual and devotion (4): The Sevenfold Puja

Obviously it would be good to end the foundation course with a celebratory puja. There is not much more to say. I hope leading the course was fruitful for you.

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Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you've finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum – a dedicated place for Mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new course. This will have two big benefits:

1. It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
2. It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a Mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) and he'll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is: www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.