

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Teachers' Notes

Introduction

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@freebuddhistudio.com

*

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.