

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

Part 1 – Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

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 unskillful 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.

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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.