

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

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 sappy 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.

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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.