

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

Part 3 – Meditation

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.)

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.