

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

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## *Part 5: Buddhism and Triratna and Devotional Practice*

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### **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](mailto:vajrashura@gmail.com), and the URL of the forum is: [www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum](http://www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum).