

# Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

## Year Two – Teachers’ Notes by Saccanama

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### *Module 1: Vision and Transformation – The Buddha’s Eightfold Path*

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#### General background and resources

I assume that this material is very familiar to most Order Members as it has been around for a long time and has always formed part of the mitra course.

If, however, you want to deepen or clarify your understanding of the material, Bhante conducted the following seminars on it (all available from Free Buddhist Audio.com: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/seminars>).

- Noble Eightfold Path – Questions and Answers with Study Leaders 1985:  
<http://tinyurl.com/yc4b53u>
- Noble Eightfold Path – Questions and Answers Tuscany 1982  
<http://tinyurl.com/ylc3gnm>
- Noble Eightfold Path – Questions and Answers Tuscany 1983  
<http://tinyurl.com/ylx5jrp>

If you want a contrasting approach, ‘*The Noble Eightfold Path – The Way to the End of Suffering*’ by Bhikkhu Bodhi is good and is available for free from Access to Insight.org:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/waytoend.html>

Bodhi restricts himself to interpreting the Eightfold Path purely from Pali/Theravadin sources in contrast to Bhante’s ecumenical approach and he uses ‘right’ instead of ‘perfect’ to translate ‘*samma*’ but he does pick up on the distinction between the mundane and the transcendental versions of the path. As with his translations, his exposition of the Pali/Theravadin tradition is clear and accessible.

#### *Note from Bhante on ‘Vision and Transformation’*

Below is something that Shantavira submitted to Shabda in January 2008. I decided not to include it in the Student Notes due to length. If you think it would be helpful, you can cut and paste it for your mitra group.

*“While sorting through thousands of documents in preparation for Windhorse Publications’ move to Cambridge, I came across a letter from Bhante addressed to Sabine Konrad (now Nagadakini) with reference to some questions she raised with him while preparing a German translation of his book, Vision and Transformation, which has now been published in the UK under the title, The*

*Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. Bhante included a 1500-word Prefatory Note to be included with the book, and copied this to Windhorse Publications with a request that the Note also be included in the next English edition. Unfortunately this was never brought to my attention, so it was not included.*

*The Note is mostly concerned with a possible confusion that has arisen in the minds of some readers with regard to what is stated on pp.19-20 (1990 edition), pp.13-14 (1999 edition), and pp.5-7 (2007 edition) about the different ways in which the Path of Vision may arise for different people, and spells out more clearly the difference between the mundane path and the transcendental path. I would strongly recommend that anyone who is leading study on this book prints off this Note. I can email it to you if you prefer.”*

*Shantavira*

from Sangharakshita  
Madhyamaloka  
dated 12 June 2000

“The eight lectures on the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path on which the present book is based were delivered in London in 1968. Ever since their serial publication in the magazine *Mitrata*, and subsequently in book form under the title *Vision and Transformation* [and more recently in a new edition as *The Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path*], they have been the subject of intense study by serious students of Buddhism, particularly those connected with Triratna. Recently I have been made aware that confusion has arisen in the minds of some students with regard to what is stated [on pp.19-20 (1990 edition), pp.13-14 (1999 edition), and pp.5-7 (2007 edition)] about the different ways in which the Path of Vision may arise for different people, and it has been suggested that a Note on the difference between the mundane and the transcendental Path would help clear up the confusion.

In [the book] itself the difference between the two paths is not actually spelled out in these terms, but it is nonetheless implicit throughout. It is clearly explained in *A Survey of Buddhism* [p.161, ninth edition 2001; p.159, most other editions], where having described the successive steps and stages of the Eightfold Path I go on to observe:

“Each of the above eight stages is again twofold, in accordance with the two different types of persons by whom it may be practised. When practised by the holy ones, technically called Aryans, of whom there are four kinds, it is known as the transmundane (*lokottara*) or transcendental Eightfold Way; when practised by non-Aryans, that is to say by *prthagjanas* (Pali *puthujjanas*) or worldlings, it is known as the mundane (*laukika*) Eightfold Way. The point of this distinction is the difference between a virtue consciously and deliberately practised, with more or less success, as a discipline, and a virtue that is the natural expression, the

spontaneous overflow, of an inner realization. The worldling treads the Path, and without doubt reaps the fruit of his treading; but the Aryan, following the advice of *The Voice of the Silence*, has ‘become that Path itself’.”

Here ‘inner realization’ is synonymous with Perfect Vision, and the virtue that is the natural expression, the spontaneous overflow, of that inner realization is the Eightfold Path when that Path, thanks to the descent into it of Perfect Vision, becomes the Path of Transformation. Similarly, the virtue that is practised consciously and deliberately, as a discipline, corresponds to the Eightfold Path when that Path is practised not as the natural expression of Perfect Vision but simply as the conscious and deliberate application of Right Understanding or Right View to one’s bodily and verbal actions.

In the case of the third and fourth steps or stages of the Eightfold Path it is comparatively easy to distinguish between the transcendental and the mundane, between those bodily and verbal actions which are the natural, spontaneous expression of Perfect Vision and those which are the conscious, deliberate product of Right Understanding or Right View. As I point out in my discussion of the *silas* or precepts [p.85 (1990 edition); p.77 (1999 edition); p.68 (2007 edition)], even when the patterns of external ethical observance are identical, the mental states behind them may be quite different. In the case of the first step or stage of the Eightfold Path it is much more difficult to distinguish the transcendental from the mundane step or stage, and it is for this reason, perhaps, that it has been questioned whether the examples I give of Perfect Vision [pp.19-20 (1990 edition); pp. 13-14 (1999 edition), pp.5-7 (2007 edition)] are not, in fact, exemplifications of the mundane aspect of Perfect Vision, i.e. exemplifications of Right Understanding or Right View.

Let me say at once that these examples are, or are intended to be, examples of Perfect Vision, not exemplifications of the mundane aspect of Perfect Vision. The confusion that has arisen with regard to the different ways in which Perfect Vision may arise for different people stems largely from the fact that transcendental experiences, and mundane experiences of a higher, more refined type, may be spoken of in what might appear to be identical terms. Thus the word ‘insight’ may signify, according to context, either a form of Perfect Vision or a kind of conceptual understanding that is simply more than normally penetrating on its own mundane level. The same is true of the word ‘mystical’, which I use, with some hesitation, in connection with Perfect Vision, but which is also often applied to meditative states that are mundane. There is also the fact that as an initial spiritual experience Perfect Vision may be virtually indistinguishable from its mundane counterpart. Only when it has developed to an extent, and has been seen to alter behaviour radically over a long period can one be sure that it is the former and not the latter. It should also be borne in mind that the Perfect Vision that arises as the first step or stage of the Noble Eightfold Path is

not Perfect Vision in its fullness. Such Perfect Vision arises only when, with the accomplishment of the seven remaining steps or stages of the Eightfold Path, one's whole being has been transformed. As I point out towards the end of the book [p.162 (1990 edition); p.152 (1999 edition); p.139 (2007 edition)], Perfect Vision in its fullness is synonymous with Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The nature of the relation between the transcendental and the mundane Eightfold Path, and hence the nature of the difference between Perfect Vision and Right Understanding or Right View, will be made clearer if we place the two Paths end to end, so to speak, to form a single Path of sixteen successive steps or stages. It will then be apparent that Right Concentration, the last step or stage of the mundane Eightfold Path, provides the basis for the development of Perfect Vision, the first step or stage of the transcendental Eightfold Path, and that with the development of Perfect Vision the truths that in the case of Right Understanding or Right View were comprehended only intellectually become a matter of inner realization. Similarly, with the development of Perfect Samadhi – the culmination of the transcendental Eightfold Path, and therefore of the Path of sixteen steps or stages in its entirety – the one-pointedness that in the case of Right Concentration is only the more or less forcible fixation of the mundane mind on a single object becomes the permanent establishment of one's entire being in Ultimate Reality.

From what I have said about the Perfect Vision that arises as the first step or stage of the Noble Eightfold Path it should be obvious that the term 'perfect' (as the translation of *samyak*) is not meant to be taken literally. The term simply indicates the fact that the particular step or stage of the Noble Eightfold Path to which it is applied is an expression, to an extent, not of Right Understanding but of Perfect Vision, though that Perfect Vision itself may not be literally perfect in the sense of being complete. The stages of the Noble Eightfold Path become literally perfect only with the attainment of Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

Failure to distinguish between the transcendental and the mundane Eightfold Path has serious practical consequences. As I point out in *The Threefold Refuge* [edited seminar transcript] (p.59):

“Not understanding the distinction between the mundane path and the Transcendental Path, people try to practise the Transcendental Path as though it was the mundane path, which makes nonsense of their practice. Perfect Vision is degraded to mere intellectual understanding of the Teaching. ...Most Theravadins have forgotten, in practice, the distinction between the mundane Eightfold Path and the Transcendental Eightfold Path. When they give a lecture on the Eightfold Path, therefore, they quite rightly start off with *samyakdrsti* or Perfect Vision; but not understanding that this is Perfect Vision in the sense of insight into the Transcendental, and

mistaking the Transcendental for the mundane and the mundane for the Transcendental, they will tell one that Perfect Vision or ‘Right View’ as they call it means a rational understanding of the Dharma and that this rational understanding is the basis on which you are to proceed... They don’t explain that in following the Transcendental Eightfold Path you first of all have a sort of spiritual vision – a sort of transcendental vision – and then transform your life in accordance with that vision.

*That is never explained.”*

On [p.30 (1990 edition); p.23 (1999 edition); p.15 (2007 edition)] I say ‘According to the Hinayana tradition, Wisdom – seeing things as they are in reality – consists in seeing objects and persons in the external world, as well as all mental phenomena, in terms of what are technically known as *dharmas*... According to the Mahayana, however, Wisdom consists in reducing the *dharmas* themselves to *sunyata*.’ This is the traditional Mahayana understanding of the relation between the two yantras. Nonetheless, the ‘germ’ of the ‘Mahayana’ view can be found in the Theravada Pali scriptures.

On [p.95 (1990 edition); p.87 (1999 edition); p.77 (2007 edition)] for ‘the teaching of Right Livelihood’ please read “the teaching of Perfect Livelihood”.

### **Material for each lecture**

I have included the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* at the beginning of the Student Notes as it is a very important Pali text and the prime source for the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path. You may or may not want to spend much time exploring it but I thought it would be good to include it for reference. There are also a number of diagrams dealing with the different ways of looking at the Eightfold Path but they should be self-explanatory.

### ***Perfect Vision***

This lecture does seem to cover a lot of ground, especially when Bhante talks about the images and concepts that give expression to right view. But if you have already been through the Foundation Year then the Wheel of Life, the figure of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Marks of Conditioned Existence, and Karma and Rebirth have already been introduced. So in the questions, I have emphasised the Four Levels of Sunyata as this is likely to be new to the mitras (it comes up again in The Bodhisattva Ideal series, lecture 6 – ‘On the Threshold of Enlightenment’: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=70>).

### ***Perfect Emotion***

This lecture is the source of the famous quote ‘For most of us the central problem of the spiritual life is to find emotional equivalents for our intellectual

understandings.’ Given that this is central to Bhante’s teaching of the Dharma, you may want to explore it in the group in some depth.

### ***Perfect Speech***

There is a very helpful and relevant teaching on speech in the *Majjhima Nikaya* called the *Abhaya or Abhayarajakumara Sutta* (MN58). In it, the Buddha outlines what he would and wouldn’t say to people and in what circumstances. Here is the Sutta (from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.058.than.html>). You may want to bring this to the attention of the group, particularly in relation to telling the truth and giving expression to criticism.

#### ***Abhaya or Abhayarajakumara Sutta***

‘I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rajagaha in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrels’ Sanctuary.

Then Prince Abhaya went to Nigantha Nataputta and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Nigantha Nataputta said to him, “Come, now, prince. Refute the words of the contemplative Gotama, and this admirable report about you will spread afar: ‘The words of the contemplative Gotama – so mighty, so powerful – were refuted by Prince Abhaya!’”

“But how, venerable sir, will I refute the words of the contemplative Gotama – so mighty, so powerful?”

“Come now, prince. Go to the contemplative Gotama and on arrival say this: ‘Lord, would the Tathagata say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others?’ If the contemplative Gotama, thus asked, answers, ‘The Tathagata would say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others,’ then you should say, ‘Then how is there any difference between you, lord, and run-of-the-mill people? For even run-of-the-mill people say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others.’ But if the contemplative Gotama, thus asked, answers, ‘The Tathagata would not say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others,’ then you should say, ‘Then how, lord, did you say of Devadatta that “Devadatta is headed for destitution, Devadatta is headed for hell, Devadatta will boil for an eon, Devadatta is incurable”?’ For Devadatta was upset & disgruntled at those words of yours.’ When the contemplative Gotama is asked this two-pronged question by you, he won’t be able to swallow it down or spit it up. Just as if a two-horned chestnut were stuck in a man’s throat: he would not be able to swallow it down or spit it up. In the same way, when the contemplative Gotama is asked this two-pronged question by you, he won’t be able to swallow it down or spit it up.”

Responding, “As you say, venerable sir,” Prince Abhaya got up from his seat, bowed down to Nigantha Nataputta, circumambulated him, and then

went to the Blessed One. On arrival, he bowed down to the Blessed One and sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he glanced up at the sun and thought, “Today is not the time to refute the Blessed One’s words. Tomorrow in my own home I will overturn the Blessed One’s words.” So he said to the Blessed One, “May the Blessed One, together with three others, acquiesce to my offer of tomorrow’s meal.”

The Blessed One acquiesced with silence.

Then Prince Abhaya, understanding the Blessed One’s acquiescence, got up from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One, circumambulated him, and left.

Then, after the night had passed, the Blessed One early in the morning put on his robes and, carrying his bowl and outer robe, went to Prince Abhaya’s home. On arrival, he sat down on a seat made ready. Prince Abhaya, with his own hand, served & satisfied the Blessed One with fine staple & non-staple foods. Then, when the Blessed One had eaten and had removed his hand from his bowl, Prince Abhaya took a lower seat and sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, “Lord, would the Tathagata say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others?”

“Prince, there is no categorical yes-or-no answer to that.”

“Then right here, lord, the Niganthas are destroyed.”

“But prince, why do you say, ‘Then right here, lord, the Niganthas are destroyed’?”

“Just yesterday, lord, I went to Nigantha Nataputta and... he said to me... ‘Come now, prince. Go to the contemplative Gotama and on arrival say this: “Lord, would the Tathagata say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others?”... Just as if a two-horned chestnut were stuck in a man’s throat: he would not be able to swallow it down or spit it up. In the same way, when the contemplative Gotama is asked this two-pronged question by you, he won’t be able to swallow it down or spit it up.’”

Now at that time a baby boy was lying face-up on the prince’s lap. So the Blessed One said to the prince, “What do you think, prince: If this young boy, through your own negligence or that of the nurse, were to take a stick or a piece of gravel into its mouth, what would you do?”

“I would take it out, lord. If I couldn’t get it out right away, then holding its head in my left hand and crooking a finger of my right, I would take it out, even if it meant drawing blood. Why is that? Because I have sympathy for the young boy.”

“In the same way, prince:

[1] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has sympathy for living beings.”

“Lord, when wise nobles or priests, householders or contemplatives, having formulated questions, come to the Tathagata and ask him, does this line of reasoning appear to his awareness beforehand – ‘If those who approach me ask this, I – thus asked – will answer in this way’ – or does the Tathagata come up with the answer on the spot?”

“In that case, prince, I will ask you a counter-question. Answer as you see fit. What do you think: are you skilled in the parts of a chariot?”

“Yes, lord. I am skilled in the parts of a chariot.”

“And what do you think: When people come & ask you, ‘What is the name of this part of the chariot?’ does this line of reasoning appear to your awareness beforehand – ‘If those who approach me ask this, I – thus asked – will answer in this way’ – or do you come up with the answer on the spot?”

“Lord, I am renowned for being skilled in the parts of a chariot. All the parts of a chariot are well-known to me. I come up with the answer on the spot.”

“In the same way, prince, when wise nobles or priests, householders or contemplatives, having formulated questions, come to the Tathagata and ask him, he comes up with the answer on the spot. Why is that? Because the property of the Dhamma is thoroughly penetrated by the Tathagata.

From his thorough penetration of the property of the Dhamma, he comes up with the answer on the spot.”

When this was said, Prince Abhaya said to the Blessed One: “Magnificent, lord! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has the Blessed One – through many lines of reasoning – made the Dhamma clear. I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Sangha of monks. May the Blessed One remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life.”

So the main factors are three: whether or not a statement is true, whether or not it is beneficial, and whether or not it is pleasing to others. The Buddha himself would state only those things that are true and beneficial, and would have a sense of time for when pleasing and unpleasing things should be said. Notice that the possibility that a statement might be untrue yet beneficial is not even entertained.

### ***Perfect Action***

The five precepts each have a week to themselves in the Foundation Year so presumably mitras will already be familiar with their implications. So the suggested questions mainly cover the big picture of Buddhist ethics rather than how to practice them.

### ***Perfect Livelihood***

Obviously this is the lecture where most has changed since Bhante gave it in 1968, the main change being the development of team-based right livelihoods and ideas such as ‘work is the Tantric Guru’. The extent to which you want to explore team-based right livelihood will probably depend on the group that you have. The table I have put in the Student Notes is meant to get people thinking about their livelihood whatever their context – it may or may not be helpful depending on your group. However, it is probably worth noting that the whole area of right livelihood is not really covered explicitly in the rest of the course (there has been an idea to develop a whole module on the topic given its importance in people’s lives) so rather than just talking about the principles, you may want to really explore the practical implications of right livelihood in people’s lives. This is where the table might be a helpful starting point.

### ***Perfect Effort***

Towards the end of this lecture, Bhante introduces the whole idea of the lower and higher evolution. It is up to you whether you want to go into this now or not. There is a whole module on ‘Evolutionary Buddhism’ in Year Four of the course which will provide a better context for exploring these teachings and you could suggest that people wait until then to go into it in depth. Bhante is, however, keen

that mitras do still know his teachings on the Higher Evolution (hence the module in Year 4).

### ***Perfect Mindfulness***

The Four Satipatthanas will be explored in some depth in the Year Two module ‘*The Way of Mindfulness*’ so perhaps it is best to stay with Bhante’s four levels or dimensions of awareness here, particularly noting how they explicitly cover awareness of the environment/things and of other people (only implicitly covered in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, and even that is debatable).

### ***Perfect Samadhi***

The Foundation Year has material on the system of meditation as well as material on working with the hindrances and *dhyana*. But it doesn’t cover the terms *samapatti* or *samadhi* so it would be good to explore these. The three samadhis correspond to the three *vimoksa mukhas* or ‘doorways to liberation’ arising out of reflection on the three marks of conditioned existence.

As far as I can ascertain, the discussion of meditation using the terms samatha, samapatti and samadhi comes from Zen tradition and presumably Bhante got it from Yogi Chen. The only reference to categorising meditation in this way that I could find is in one of his booklets which you can find on the web.

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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).