

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Two – Teachers’ Notes by Saccanama

Module 5: What is the Sangha? – Exploring Spiritual Community

As I have prepared this module, I have come to think that it is very important to go into some of the issues contained in it in depth. Given the prevalence of individualism in our society, and often a suspicion of groups, it is very important that mitras understand both the importance of Going for Refuge to the Sangha and some of Bhante’s clarifications about the nature of the Sangha.

References for further reading are included in the Student Notes but I would particularly recommend Subhuti’s book ‘*Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*’ on Sangha and spiritual friendship as he is very good at clarifying the development of Bhante’s thinking (as he is on most other issues).

‘*Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*’:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=377>

Unit 1 – Going for Refuge to the Sangha

As this is a general introductory week, you may want to suggest spending some time talking about people’s experience of the Sangha Jewel and how they relate to it and Go for Refuge to it. This could set the appropriate tone for the rest of the series.

Unit 2 – The Traditional Sangha and the History of the Spiritual Community

This unit is wide-ranging in its themes and you may need to pick and choose as to what you can cover in the group. It touches on the Axial Age which the mitras may or may not be familiar with. It is worth noting that it is not just one of Bhante’s particular hobby-horses but has been taken up by Ken Wilber (who has significantly developed it) and Karen Armstrong, both of them well-known contemporary writers. It also touches on the spiritual import of other religions, particularly with the quote used in Question 4. These kinds of views can press some people’s buttons which you may need to look out for but it can be worthwhile trying to understand why Bhante gives expression to such views i.e. about the authoritarian difficulties of monotheism.

You may want to draw people’s attention to Reginald Ray’s three-fold model during this week as it is an important contribution to our understanding of the Sangha. Vadanya does mention it in Part 5 of the Foundation Year but it may be good to explore it further.

Unit 3 – Individuality: the Essence of the Sangha

The background of Bhante’s thinking on the lower and higher evolution is implicit in much of what follows so while you may not want to go into it in detail (there is a

whole module on it in Year 4 for those who wish to explore it in more detail), it may be worthwhile clarifying the key points e.g. the distinction between the lower and higher evolution.

Bhante's use of the terms 'true individual' and 'group' are creative translations of the terms *arya* and *prthagjana* and as such, are a good example of his attempt to translate the Dharma into terms that are comprehensible to modern Westerners. But they are rooted in traditional terms – he hasn't just made them up (as sometimes people seem to think about his modernisations or translations!).

Ratnaguna recently suggested that the term 'viveka' might correspond to what Bhante means by True Individual. See his talk '*The Early Teachings of the Buddha*' available from Free Buddhist Audio.com:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC45>

Unit 4 – The Group, the Positive Group and the Spiritual Community

The role of the new society is touched upon here, something which doesn't get much coverage these days. You may want to go into it in more depth or it could be a topic that someone may want to explore in their project. Bhante is still very keen on the basic idea of building a new society amidst the old.

Unit 5 – Effective Going for Refuge and the Third Order of Consciousness

I have chosen to use this extract from Subhuti's book as it covers material about ordination, the third order of consciousness, and the myth of the Order which is not otherwise touched on in '*What is the Sangha?*' I didn't think we could have a module on the Sangha without exploring these key topics. Depending on who is in your group, you may want to go into the whole area of what ordination means and why people might want to take that step, perhaps outlining what that involves.

The excerpt does repeat some of the material on the group and individual but with some different quotes and it also refers to the material in Bhante's '*The FWBO and Protestant Buddhism*'. You may want to read this yourself before the group meeting.

'The FWBO and Protestant Buddhism':

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=355>

Unit 6 – Is a Guru Necessary?

I think this is a cracking lecture and should be good for an evening's discussion and exploration! No doubt the old chestnut of 'more developed' may come up and perhaps issues to do with Bhante as a teacher and guru. You may want to talk about your own experience of a guru/teacher.

Unit 7 – The Meaning of Friendship

Obviously, we couldn't have a module on Sangha without looking at friendship but it is rather cursory due to time. I think a whole module on it wouldn't be excessive. But in the meantime we have a week to explore it. You may want to get people to talk about their experience of friendship.

Unit 8 – Fidelity and Gratitude

These are two important aspects of Sangha – particularly the exploration of gratitude is very relevant in our day and age.

An Extra Week?

Depending on the make-up of your group, you may want to have an extra week exploring either *Chapter 12 – The Artist as the True Individual*, or *Chapter 13 – Being a Buddhist Parent*. I leave this at your discretion as to whether you think it appropriate to look at either of these sections. Obviously there is good further reading for both, including *'The Religion of Art'* and *'A Path for Parents'* by Sara Burns (Karunagita).

'The Religion of Art':

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=349>

'A Path for Parents':

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=719>

'Buddhist Parenting – by Karunagita' (audio):

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM780>

'Buddhist Parenting – by Karunagita' (text):

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/read?num=FBA80&at=text>

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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.