

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 5: Buddhism and the Triratna Buddhist Community, Devotional Practice

Week 5: Ritual and Devotion (2) – Some Devotional Practices used in the Triratna Buddhist Community

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In next three sessions we will be looking at the main devotional practices used in, firstly to get a clear idea of the purpose of each one, and secondly to find ways to engage more deeply with these practices. This week we will look at the Refuges and Precepts, the Threefold Pūjā, and the Dedication Ceremony. In the next session we explore the meaning of the Tiratana Vandana, and we will then devote the last session of this series on devotional practice to exploring the Sevenfold Pūjā.

The Refuges and Precepts

The Three Refuges and the ‘negative’ form of the Five Precepts, chanted in Pāli , followed by the ‘positive’ Precepts in English, are perhaps the most fundamental and essential devotional practice that we use in Triratna. The Refuges express our heartfelt commitment to the ideals of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha – our Going for Refuge – which is the what makes someone a Buddhist. Sangharakshita regards this Going for Refuge as the central spiritual experience, an experience that can occur at deeper and deeper levels. It is also an experience that can have many facets, including Insight, the arising of faith, and the altruistic desire to make a positive difference to the lives of others. The Five Precepts (or the Ten Precepts taken by Order members) follow naturally from this Going for Refuge. Practising the Precepts is the most obvious and practical way that we undertake to make our commitment to the Three Jewels a reality in our everyday lives.

For these reasons regularly chanting the Refuges and Precepts is a clear and powerful way to re-connect with what our lives are about, and to remind ourselves of what this implies for our daily behaviour. The practice gives us a regular opportunity to re-experience our commitment, and to remind ourselves to live by it. Without this constant re-experiencing and reminding, our commitment to the Three Jewels is often likely to be forgotten amid the rough-and-tumble of life in the everyday world.

Why chant in Pāli?

It may seem strange that we chant the Refuges and Precepts mainly in Pāli , when perhaps the meaning of what we are saying would loom larger in our minds if we were chanting in our own language. However there are some good reasons why we chant in Pāli . Although Pāli was almost certainly not the language spoken by the Buddha, it is probably as close to it as we can get, and because it is the language of the Pāli Canon, it is a link back to the historical Buddha and his followers,

whose lives and teachings are recorded so vividly in these writings. The Pāli verses also link us with the other Buddhists throughout the world who chant the Refuges in this language. So by chanting the Refuges and ‘negative’ precepts in Pāli, we remind ourselves of our connections with all other Buddhists, in other countries all over the world, and stretching back through time to the historical Buddha and his disciples. In contrast, if we all chanted the Refuges in our own modern language, then even within Triratna we would be saying different words from those repeated by our fellow Sangha members in different countries, and we would have lost an important opportunity to rise above our limited identification with our own culture, and instead to experience a sense of solidarity with all who belong to the ‘family of the Buddha’.

Involving the body

The Refuges and Precepts start with the phrase, ‘Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa’, translated in the Triratna Pūjā Book as “Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.” The Pāli word *namo*, translated here as ‘homage’, implies a greeting involving a physical gesture of respect, with the hands held together in reverence. We normally make this gesture as we chant the Refuges and Precepts – the so-called *añjali mūdra*, a traditional sign of reverence in the Buddhist tradition. Placing our hands together in this gesture can make the emotional content of the words we are saying much more powerful – there is something real and direct about a physical gesture that speaks straight to the heart. In ritual practice we express ourselves with our whole being – with the body, as well as with the speech and mind – and this is one of the reasons it is so effective. If we feel resistance to making this gesture, it is precisely because it is such a potent way of expressing and invoking reverence.

The value of repetition

After the preliminary lines of homage to the Buddha, we chant the three Refuges three times each. This repetition gives us an extra opportunity to become fully aware of the meaning of what we are saying. Sometimes it may take us one round of the Refuges – or more – before we even remember what we are doing. Chanting three times also gives us an opportunity to call to mind different aspects of our commitment to the Three Jewels. For example, in our first chanting of the Sangha Refuge we might call to mind the Ārya Sangha – all those throughout time and space who have broken through to a higher level of awareness, and any great figures from the Buddhist tradition who we particularly admire. In the second round we might call to mind our commitment to Triratna, and our gratitude to all those who have devoted their lives to giving us the well-resourced Movement that we have today. In the third round we might call to mind our commitment to make a positive contribution to our local Sangha, which is probably the main way that the Sangha Refuge manifests in our everyday lives. Obviously the same principle can be applied to the other Refuges, and of course you will see aspects of each Refuge that have a particular meaning for you.

Re-committing to the Precepts

Having reminded ourselves of our commitment to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha by chanting the Refuges, we move on to chanting the Five Precepts, which are the most fundamental way in which we express our Going for Refuge in our day-to-day lives.

As we chant the traditional ‘negative’ form of the Precepts, we may become painfully aware of the ways in which we do not practice one or more the Precepts, and this can have the effect of undermining our sense of commitment. Maybe we remember the slightly-too-much beer we drank just last week at that party – and our behaviour afterwards – or the knee-jerk lie we told yesterday to get ourselves off the hook, or our unkind words we said to somebody who annoyed us. Perhaps half-consciously we think, “I did those things after the last time I chanted the precepts, and no doubt I will fall short of my commitment this time too.” So perhaps we chant with a sense that we are going through the motions, rather than with genuine commitment.

If chanting the precepts makes us aware of the ways in which we do not keep them – even if it makes us painfully aware of this – then this is a valuable and necessary part of our practice. Such remorse and disappointment with ourselves is a highly positive mental state – if not a pleasant one – and it gives us a strong motivation to align our life more closely with our values and ideals. But if our failure to keep the precepts perfectly in the past undermines our sense of being able to commit to them in the future, or if we feel that if we cannot keep the Precepts perfectly there is no point in practising them at all, then we need to remember the spirit behind the words we are chanting. Although the words of the Precepts simply ask us to “undertake to refrain from” taking life, taking the not-given, and so on, Sangharakshita has often translated this as “I undertake the training principle of refraining” from this or that action. The Precepts are training principles that we take on as a practice, not commandments that we must obey perfectly. No unenlightened human being keeps the Precepts perfectly. (Anyone who thinks they do so almost certainly has too simplistic an understanding of the Precepts. For example, it may be quite easy to refrain from intentionally killing another being with your own hands, but to completely avoid harming any other being in any way, or causing others to do so, is another matter.)

Because the Precepts are training guidelines, what is important is not so much that we keep them perfectly, but that we keep moving in the right direction. If we commit to the training principle of running a few miles every day, or to a daily practice of yoga, we do not feel that this is pointless because we cannot run a marathon, or because we cannot do the most difficult asanas precisely and perfectly. We keep stretching ourselves, we keep moving the goalposts, and this is what we commit to, not to some idea of perfection. Our commitment to the Precepts is the same. It is a commitment to moving forward, in the direction of a life that is more and more aligned with Buddhist values, and we should not allow the fact that we do not yet practice the Precepts perfectly to undermine our determination to carry this through.

Celebrating our Going for Refuge

At the end of the ‘negative’ Precepts in Pāli , we chant *sādhu* three times. As you probably know, *sādhu* is an expression of joy and celebration. In the Pāli Canon, when men and women were moved by the Buddha’s teaching and went for Refuge to him, this was usually accompanied by a heartfelt outburst of joy. With us, when we truly Go for Refuge, it should be the same. If we Go for Refuge in the right spirit we feel joy that we have found real meaning in life. We may feel that we have been released from a grey existence of indecision, lack of direction, and trivial concerns, and that we have entered a more colourful and vivid world where life has real significance, and even an element of magic. When we undertake the precepts we may feel delighted that we have been released from a prison of trivial, silly pleasures and dislikes, and started to live in a way that does not diminish and cramp us . So joy is a natural accompaniment to Going for Refuge, and we express this with three *sādhus*.

The ‘positive’ Precepts

After the traditional ‘negative’ form of the Precepts, we chant them in their ‘positive’ form, this time in our own language, in words composed by Sangharakshita. Chanting this positive form of the Precepts reminds us that practising them is not about a literalistic adherence to the letter of a set of rules. Practising the Precepts does not mean valuing rules for rules’ sake, it means applying the principles of kindness, generosity, contentment, honesty, and awareness to our daily lives. It means living by the major, overarching spiritual principles that sum up the Buddhist approach to life. The positive form also makes it clear that we can never practice the Precepts perfectly, until we are Enlightened, and that our attempt to live ethically is always work-in-progress – imagine what it would mean, for example, to be perfectly generous, perfectly contented with a simple life, or perfectly aware.

The value of repetition – again

As with any other practice, devotional practices only have a significant effect if we repeat them many times; and because chanting the Refuges and Precepts is a short practice that is fundamental to being a Buddhist, we can and should do it often and regularly. If you do not already do so, perhaps you could try chanting the Refuges and Precepts before or after your morning meditation, then perhaps making an offering of incense to your shrine. Do this for at least a week, genuinely trying to find ways to engage with the words you are saying, and see how this affects the rest of your day. Or, if you do not meditate in the morning, try devoting a few minutes to a brief morning ritual in which you chant the Refuges, to remind yourself of how you intend to approach the coming day.

The Threefold Pūjā

The Threefold Pūjā was written by Sangharakshita as a shorter and plainer alternative to the more elaborate Sevenfold Pūjā, but it is an important practice in

its own right. The Short Pūjā is essentially a means to connect with and cultivate our sense of reverence for the Three Jewels, with a particular emphasis on the Buddha. The ‘Opening Reverence’ is a simple recollection of our respect for the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The second section, ‘Reverence to the Three Jewels’, expands on this, reminding us that we too can attain what the Buddha attained; reminding us that Going for Refuge to the Dharma means a real commitment to “study, practice [and] realize” the teachings; and finally presenting us with the image of the Sangha as “an ever-widening circle” – a circle that we can help to expand.

In the final section of the pūjā we make three traditional offerings – flowers, light and incense – either in our imagination or in reality. The verses of the pūjā connect these offerings with three brief Dharmic reflections: the flowers are a reminder of impermanence; the light is a reminder of the illuminating wisdom of the Dharma handed on to us by the Buddha, which we can hand on in turn; the pervasive quality of the smell of incense is a reminder that the effects of spiritual practice do not stop with our own mental states, but that skilful action sends out ripples in all directions, influencing those around us, who in turn influence others, so that the way we live has an effect that is probably far greater and extends far further than we are aware of.

These three offerings in the last section of the pūjā are the same as those you made during your mitra ceremony – which is a powerful occasion for many people. For this reason you may be able to use the Threefold Pūjā to re-connect with what you felt when you became a mitra. It is important to find ways to recall significant turning points like this, reconnecting with the sense of decision and commitment we felt at the time, and with the sense of support from others in the Sangha we experienced. As you chant the verses of the Threefold Pūjā you could make this an opportunity to re-live in your imagination the offerings you made at your mitra ceremony, and to re-experience the deepening of commitment that this signified.

Like the Refuges and Precepts, the Threefold Pūjā is a short practice that we can chant on our own in just a few minutes. It can easily be incorporated into our daily routine if we find it useful.

The Dedication Ceremony

The Dedication Ceremony is used for a very specific purpose – to dedicate a place in which we will practice the Dharma, transforming it in our imagination into a sacred place, a protected mandala in which a sort of alchemical transmutation can occur. Within this transformed and dedicated space, the base metal of our ordinary mind can become Buddha, our thought can become Dharma, and our communication with one another can become Sangha. This idea of the dedicated and therefore protected mandala within which transformation can occur is the central image of the Dedication Ceremony.

Mandalas come in many forms, and have many symbolic associations. The type of mandala we are concerned with here represents an ordered, enclosed, and sacred

precinct, where we are protected from adverse influences from outside, and where something special can therefore happen. Traditionally such mandalas are often pictured as being surrounded and protected by an inner circle of lotuses, an impenetrable adamantine wall of vajras, and an outer circle of fire – all of which are referred to in the third part of the ceremony.

Some people have objected to the verse in the Dedication Ceremony that begins, “Though in the world outside there is strife/ Here may there be peace,” apparently on the grounds that they express a triumphalistic sentiment, comparing life within Triratna favourably to everything that happens outside it. However this objection is based on a misunderstanding. The “here” that the verses refer to – within which there is peace, love, and joy, in comparison to the strife, hate, and grief found outside – is the dedicated and protected mandala that we create in our imagination by performing the Dedication Ceremony.

As well as dedicating a place, we often use the Dedication Ceremony to dedicate a period of time to the practice of the Dharma. Often the two go together, as when we dedicate an ordinary rented hall for a weekend retreat, or an ordinary rented cottage for a period of solitary meditation. But we can also use the Dedication Ceremony to commit ourselves to a special period of practice. In the ‘Urban Retreats’ that have been introduced at some centres, in which people step up the level of their practice for a week while going about their ordinary lives, many people begin each day by chanting the Dedication Ceremony, changing the words “we dedicate this place” to “I dedicate this day.”

Getting our depths on our side

By chanting these verses of dedication, in our imagination changing an ordinary place into a protected mandala, or changing an otherwise ordinary period of our life into a special opportunity for transformation, we send an important message to our unconscious, which can have a powerful effect on our experience. Ordinary places and the routines of ordinary life tend to evoke our ordinary states of mind. When things are ordinary we find ourselves quite naturally slipping into our usual habits. And why not? After all – we think in our depths – everything is as usual, and this is what I usually do, this is how I usually think, this is how I usually feel. So we carry on as usual.

But our unconscious depths can be profoundly influenced by ritual. This is one of the important features of ritual practice – that it can speak directly to our unconscious mind, rather than just to the rationalistic, conscious part of our awareness – and the effects can be far more powerful than we probably realize. By chanting the Dedication Ceremony, engaging our mind with the meaning of what we are saying, and at the same time using our body to reinforce what we are expressing, we tell our unconscious depths that something different and special is happening. If we engage with this practice strongly enough, so that the message gets through, we may find that we can effortlessly leave behind old habits and patterns – for a period – and that we become far more open to experiencing new and better states of mind. Somehow we know in our depths that this is a special

time and place, so we do not even feel tempted to indulge in old unskilful patterns. Somehow our hindrances seem to go into abeyance. Perhaps we do not even think about sex, or any other craving, for a while. Ill-will does not raise its ugly head. We have no problem getting up to meditate, when usually it is a struggle. Somehow we seem to have left our usual anxious concerns at home. We feel able to commit ourselves to practice, in a way that in our normal situation often seems impossible. What has happened is that our unconscious mind has got the message, and is working on the side of the Dharma – at least for this special time, and in this special place. Through the power of ritual practice we have persuaded our unconscious mind to help our practice, at least for a while, rather than undermining it, as it so often does.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. If you do not already do so, try chanting the Refuges and Precepts every morning to start your day, as suggested in the text. Notice any effects this has on your state of mind, and be prepared to tell the group about them.
2. The text suggests that chanting each Refuge three times gives us an opportunity to call to mind different aspects of the Three Jewels, or different aspects of our commitment to each of them. Think of some different aspects of the Three Jewels that have a particular meaning to you, and/or think of some different aspects of your commitment to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and share these with the group. Try calling some of these different aspects of your Going for Refuge to mind as you go through the three repetitions of each Refuge, and notice any effects.
3. What is your attitude to making physical gestures of respect and reverence, such as holding the hands in the añjali mūdā, or bowing to the shrine? What feelings does making such gestures evoke for you?
4. Spend some time remembering how you felt at your mitra ceremony. Try to re-experience what you felt at the time, and express this ritually by offering a flower, a candle and a stick of incense to a shrine, perhaps in the context of a Threefold Pūjā.
5. Find some images of mandalas and bring them to the mitra group. Be prepared to discuss what such images of mandalas evoke for you.
6. Have you ever experienced a particular place or time as somehow special, and found that old habits go into abeyance, and positive states become easier to access, at least for a while? (For example, this sometimes happens when we go on retreat.) Do you think that the Dedication Ceremony could help to strengthen or create this effect?

Practices Referred to in the Text

The Refuges and Five Precepts

The Three Refuges

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Saṅghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Tatīyampi Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Tatīyampi Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Tatīyampi Saṅghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Translation

Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Enlightened One!

To the Buddha for refuge I go.

To the Dharma for refuge I go.

To the Sangha for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Buddha for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Dharma for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Sangha for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Buddha for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Dharma for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Sangha for refuge I go.

The Five Precepts

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Musāvāda veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Surāmeraya majja pamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Sādhu Sādhu Sādhu

Translation

I undertake to abstain from taking life.
I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.
I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.
I undertake to abstain from false speech.
I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.

The Positive Precepts

With deeds of loving kindness, I purify my body.
With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.
With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

The Threefold Pūjā

1. Opening reverence

We reverence the Buddha, the Perfectly Enlightened One, the Shower of the Way.
We reverence the Dharma, the Teaching of the Buddha, which leads from darkness to Light.

We reverence the Sangha, the fellowship of the Buddha's disciples, that inspires and guides.

2. Reverence to the Three Jewels

We reverence the Buddha, and aspire to follow Him.
The Buddha was born as we are born. *
What the Buddha overcame, we too can overcome;
What the Buddha attained, we too can attain.

We reverence the Dharma, and aspire to follow it
With body, speech, and mind until the end.
The Truth in all its aspects, the Path in all its stages,
We aspire to study, practise, realize.

We reverence the Sangha, and aspire to follow it:
The fellowship of those who tread the Way.
As, one by one, we make our own commitment,
An ever-widening circle, the Sangha grows.

(* Or 'The Buddha was a man, as we are men.')

3. Offerings to the Buddha

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer flowers:
Flowers that today are fresh and sweetly blooming,
Flowers that tomorrow are faded and fallen.
Our bodies too, like flowers, will pass away.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer candles:
To Him, who is the Light, we offer light.
From His greater lamp a lesser lamp we light within us:
The lamp of Bodhi shining within our hearts.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer incense:
Incense whose fragrance pervades the air.
The fragrance of the perfect life, sweeter than incense,
Spreads in all directions throughout the world.

The Dedication Ceremony

We dedicate this place to the Three Jewels:
To the Buddha, the Ideal of Enlightenment to which we aspire;
To the Dharma, the Path of the Teaching which we follow;
To the Sangha, the spiritual fellowship with one another which we enjoy.

Here may no idle word be spoken;
Here may no unquiet thought disturb our minds.

To the observance of the Five Precepts
We dedicate this place;

To the practice of meditation
We dedicate this place;

To the development of wisdom
We dedicate this place;

To the attainment of Enlightenment
We dedicate this place.

Though in the world outside there is strife
Here may there be peace;
Though in the world outside there is hate
Here may there be love;
Though in the world outside there is grief
Here may there be joy.

Not by the chanting of the sacred Scriptures,
Not by the sprinkling of holy water,
But by our own efforts towards Enlightenment
We dedicate this place.

Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,
May the lotus petals of purity open;
Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,
May the vajra-wall of determination extend;
Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,
May the flames that transmute Saṃsāra into Nirvana arise.

Here seated, here practising,
May our mind become Buddha,
May our thought become Dharma,
May our communication with one another be Sangha.

For the happiness of all beings,
For the benefit of all beings,
With body, speech, and mind,
We dedicate this place.