

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Four – Teachers’ Notes

Module 4: Know Your Mind – The Ethical Psychology of the Abhidharma

Teacher’s Notes by Sudarshini

The material to be studied in this module is quite extensive and reasonably self-contained, so there is no real need to provide a reading list for further study. However, the module assumes a certain level of knowledge and understanding of basic Buddhist teachings regarding craving, aversion and ignorance, for example, and mitras may wish to seek out additional teachings of Bhante and Subhuti on topics such as śraddhā.

Although a synopsis of the first four chapters is provided as an appendix in the Student Notes, it would be of great benefit for the mitras to read and reflect on the material in these chapters for themselves. This could be recommended by the teacher before this module begins – perhaps at the end of the previous one. With so much material, there is a danger of becoming bogged down in the ideas and/or in making comparisons with modern western psychology, especially in the case of mitras involved in counselling or psychotherapy. It is important therefore to continually emphasise the ethical, practical and spiritual nature of Buddhist psychology. The course provides plenty of opportunities for testing the teachings in experience and mitras should be encouraged to do this. The suggested meditations included in the Student Notes are an excellent way to do this and they can be practised both in the group sessions and in daily practice.

I have included some ideas for ‘homework’ as a way of reinforcing the ideas and retaining a sense of practical experimentation. You may also want to consider the idea of a weekend retreat to meditate and reflect on the material further.

Unit 1

The above will need to be emphasised when introducing the course to your mitra group. Some may have gleaned a negative impression of the traditional Abhidharma as a form of futile ‘hair-splitting’ analysis and you may need to bring out the practical value of such analysis in regard to mental states.

Allow time for responses to, and questions about, the first four chapters, though probably best to avoid getting into deep philosophical discussions about the nature of reality!

You will need to be familiar with *The Shepherd’s Search for Mind* and you can ask many of the same questions as Milarepa asks the shepherd boy (Bhante led a seminar on this song of Milarepa, the transcript of which is available on Free Buddhist Audio).

<http://tinyurl.com/cu9vc7>

They are a useful way of introducing people to the elusive quality of the mind. You could also explore with them how people use the word ‘mind’ in common parlance? Could you substitute ‘brain’ in these usages? E.g. “I haven’t made up my brain yet!”

Units 2 and 3

If there is time after the meditation, you might like to have a few minutes discussion on how far people in the group were aware of each of the mental events being discussed.

Homework:

Members of the group could continue to look out for the presence of these events in everyday experience as well as in meditation.

Unit 4

At this point, it might be good to re-cap the omnipresent and object-determining mental events, emphasising their ethically neutral nature, though the latter progressively become ethically positive through their application in meditation.

This unit can provide an opportunity to invite confessions, if there is sufficient trust between people in the group.

Homework:

To notice the presence or absence of *śraddhā* in their experience in the coming week. They could also bring greater awareness to any occasions in which they experience *hrī* or *apatrāpya*. Remind them that these two are positive mental events, albeit often unpleasant.

Unit 5

Explore their experience of *śraddhā*, *hrī* and *apatrāpya* during the week.

Homework:

To notice, as often as possible, the movement of the mind towards or away from an object. To see if they can catch the process and develop the positive states of *alobha* and *adveṣa*.

Unit 6

Discuss experiences of craving/attachment during the week.

Homework:

To notice the part that views play in their everyday experience – their attachment to them, the effect they have on their attitudes and actions. To see if they can detect the underlying desires or fears that give rise to them. In particular, to notice self-views and comparing themselves with others.

Unit 7

Discuss any links observed between their views and their desires/fears.

Homework:

To pay attention to *vīrya* as a mental event, noticing occasions when they deliberately turn their minds away from the unskilful to the skilful. Also, to note any degree of *upekṣā* – not being swayed by objects of craving or aversion.

Unit 8

Discuss experiences of *vīrya* and *upekṣā* during the week. Allow time for any final questions and an overview of the course. You may wish to include a further two weeks for mitra projects.

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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.