

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras Year Three – Teachers’ Notes

Module 6: An Interconnected World – Buddhist Ethics and Contemporary Issues

Notes and Suggested Activities for Group Leaders

This module differs from many others in that it applies the Dharma to wider issues that go well beyond normal Buddhist practice. So as a study leader, you will not necessarily have the same level of knowledge of some aspects of the material as those participating. The aim of the course is not to offer answers but to stimulate participants to think for themselves how Buddhist teachings may be brought to bear on contemporary issues. You may find that your role as study leader is therefore one of fellow explorer.

Below there are a number of group exercises that you might wish to use. There is often a tendency when people start to talk about the state of the world to talk quite cerebrally, or even in an opinionated way. These exercises might be helpful in encouraging people to speak ‘from the heart’ and to relate the material to their own experience. For this reason they might be suitable at the beginning of a study session. They do not necessarily relate to all the material, so they complement rather than replace the list of questions for discussion at the end of each section.

Week 1: Introduction

- Arrange the group in pairs and ask them to take it in turns to speak for 2 minutes with the other person listening.
- As the speaker, imagine the person in front of you is a political activist and has asked you how meditation is going to help them. How would you respond?
- A bell marks the end of each 2 minute period and the roles are exchanged. Allow one minute of silence at the beginning of each period of speaking for the speaker to connect with their intention for the communication they are about to begin.
- Now ask them to imagine that the person works in a service project such as a women’s refuge or a drug rehabilitation centre and asks you the same question. How would you respond?
- Mark with one minute and two minutes as before and exchange roles.
- The group shares their reflection on the exercise.

Week 2: Sangha and Community in a Divided World

- Put a bandage, a small rūpa and a plant in a pot in the middle of the room. These represent the three aspects of the Great Turning mentioned in the text, a bandage (damage limitation actions), a Buddha rūpa (consciousness raising activities) and a plant in a pot (life affirming activities).
- After a period of working in pairs to decide on what they are going to describe, ask people to come and talk briefly about something they are involved in or inspired by in one or more of the categories. Note that some activities fall into all three areas.
- OR ask the group to take some time individually to list all the groups and communities that they are a part of. Do they support their self-development? If not, how can they bring about change – either by withdrawing from it or influencing it from within?

Week 3: Buddhism and Peace

Lead the group in this exercise:

- Sit quietly, allowing yourself to become calm and receptive. Reflect on the difficulties and afflictions in your life as being your most valuable aid to cultivating fearlessness and peace of mind.
 - Then think of a difficulty, affliction or pain in your life. As you sense this affliction, how does it *feel*, and how does it affect your body? Holding the feeling carefully, begin to ask yourself the following questions, listening inwardly for their answers. (Note that it is not necessary to reveal to others the origin of your affliction, we are concerned here only with what it feels like).
1. How have I emotionally responded to this affliction so far, and how have I suffered from my response and reaction to it?
 2. What does this problem ask me to let go of?
 3. What difficulties, if any, am I having with becoming deeply *aware* of my emotional response to this affliction?

(From an exercise called ‘Turning Muck into Gold’, from Jack Kornfield’s *Path with Heart*.)

Week 4: Buddhism and Social Equality

Lead an extended mettā practice with a longer fifth stage.

Suggestions:

- You could become aware of the different cultures of the people in different parts of the world.
- You could notice if you have assumptions about what people are like in different parts of the world, how they live and what they believe.
- You could notice any attraction or aversion.
- You could actively try to loosen your mind from those views and
- Cultivate mettā whoever they are.

Week 5: Money, Economics and the Dharma

- Allow time for each person to reflect on their own attitudes to money in the light of Kessel's archetypes, and what changes they may need to make to move towards a more mature relationship with money. Ask them to share their thoughts in pairs or small groups.
- In pairs, each person takes a few minutes to finish these sentences:

When I think of a simple life, it conjures up...

A simpler life in my own situation would mean...

– Then they could share their reflections with the whole group.

Week 6: Buddhism, Technology and Ethics

Lead the group through this guided meditation:

- Sit in pairs opposite each other and close your eyes.
- We are going to be moving back in time through space to our beginnings, the beginning of the universe 14 billion years ago. We were all there, in some form, from the very beginning of things.

Our universe flashes into being, time, space and energy existent from that moment.

We are there in the fundamental particles, floating in the cosmos, no gravity, no mass,... floating freely, boundless...

anything and everything is possible...
all potential, all that is to be is within you...
the seeds of all beings present and yearning to emerge in you...

feel a stirring, a calling that grows in you, insistent,
the seeds of all beings are yearning to take form...
form into stellar clouds...

feel another kind of pull, a gravitational pull...
stellar clouds forming balls of gas, stars are born...
stellar bodies, stars and galaxies... move in and out of each others'
orbits,...
billions upon billions of expressions of light and form radiating out...

we are the dust swirling around our sun...
collapsing into a shining, blue planet...
for the first time aware of our solidity, huge and magnificent...
floating like a jewel in space...

we feel the elements...
intense heat...
cooling winds...
rain, and for the first time, the flow of water...
the earth beneath our feet...

Now begin to experience the stillness and the contact with the floor,
The ease of being held by gravity.
Notice how you don't have to do anything... held, supported, no effort
needed...
breathing... be breathed...
Experiencing everything for the first time... this is your first breath... this
one now...

Take one of your partners hands.

What you are holding? Explore it as if for the first time... no memory,
imagination, what anyone ever told you before. This is your own fresh new
experience... sense of touch... of something other...

Be aware of its shape, texture, pliancy, temperature.
Does it change? Does it move? Is it sensitive? Does it respond?
Learn. Remember it.

Open your awareness to its journey through time...
This comes from stardust...
through a myriad of stellar forms... became solid... watery... a miracle
happened – life emerged...
Once it was a fin... primordial seas...

It pushed out onto dry land... became scaly... grew fur and became a paw...
developed fingers and thumb...
co-evolved alongside other plants and animals.
Grip that was just the right size to hold a branch that would take the weight of your whole body as you swing through the trees...
then a hand...
It connected with the elements...
It became an instrument of knowing...

Recall again that this hand comes from stardust and continues to be made out of stardust... you are part of all time that has ever existed...

Eyes still closed, let go of the hand.

Become aware of your body...
your contact with the floor...
gravity... let yourself be supported by the Earth
be aware of your breathing...
let yourself be breathed....

(Based on the work of John Seed and Joanna Macy and adapted by Rowan Tilly and Khemasuri)

Week 7: Buddhism and the Ecological Crisis

Read this extract from the text to the group:

If we look around, we will see all sorts of responses to the ecological crisis. There is outright denial by some people that anything is wrong; others are locked in a kind of paralysed despair, or just hope that someone else will come up with a solution. Some make changes to their lifestyles, but perhaps out of a dry, and even self-righteous, sense of duty. Others might throw themselves into a kind of activism that spreads more anxiety, gloominess or anger and really just makes things worse.

A truly Buddhist response will be very different in spirit. It will be infused with a sense of liberation, the taste of freedom. At each step, it will connect us more deeply and richly with others, and with the natural world. It will mean having the courage to let go of old patterns, habits, ways of identifying ourselves, and sources of security. But that will not be in the spirit of miserable self-denial.

Scatter postcards (birthday cards etc) or pictures from magazines and papers on a table or the floor. Ask them to think of a person or a project which seems to be 'infused with the sense of liberation' in response to suffering. Ask them to choose two pictures which illustrated a story they could tell us about that project or person.

Week 8: Conclusion

Ask a member of the group to read the *Shambala Mind Trainings*. In pairs, discuss, “Which of them most speak to you and how would you express them in your life?” Feed back the answers of your partner to the whole group.

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 mitra 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) 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.