

# Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

## Year Three – Teachers’ Notes

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### *Module 1: “Letters of Gold, Letters of Fire” – Living with the Dhammapada*

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#### **Background**

When Ratnaguna revised the Mitra Course in 1998, he included a new module called 'Selected Suttas of the Pāli Canon' which you will probably be familiar with. One of the purposes of that module was to redress an imbalance in the course between Mahāyāna sūtras and Pāli material. However, with the new course, quite a number of Pāli suttas are included in different modules and this gives a much better overall balance to the course. It also means that we don't need so much of a 'selected suttas' approach as we already have selected suttas present in the course. So I have chosen to base this Pāli module on just one text so that the students can get to know it in at least some depth (there will be a similar study of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in Year Four). That text happens to be one of central importance both to the Buddhist tradition and to Bhante. If I remember rightly, he has said on a number of occasions that it is his 'favourite' Buddhist text or the one that he returns to most frequently and it is the only longer Buddhist work that he has translated. So I am confident that it will be a significant addition to the course and a great opportunity to get to know one of the classics of Buddhist thought, practice and literature.

#### **General approach**

As is clear from the Student Material, I want people not only to study the text but to take it to heart and let it affect them more deeply (at least to the extent that they are willing or able to do this!). So I suggest beginning each session by chanting the *Tiratana Vandana* in order to connect the students with the Pāli tradition – a background aim of this module – and create a devotional context; it will also help people to familiarise themselves with this important part of our liturgy. One week of the Foundation Year (Part Five – Week Six) does explore the *Tiratana Vandana* and look at the translation of it so if your group hasn't studied that, you may wish to look at it briefly. I would then suggest reading a couple of *vaggas* (sections) of the *Dhammapada*. I would also recommend that you conclude the evening by reading another couple of *vaggas*. The most obvious way to do this would be to start at the beginning and carry on to the end but if you want to do it another way, that is up to you.

I have also made some other suggestions in the Student Material as to how people could engage with the text. If you have other ideas about this then do use them over the course of the 8 weeks.

#### **Study material**

Padmavajra's talks were given on a men's retreat and there are one or two slight references that might not be relevant to a female audience. I personally don't think

this should be a problem but if you are a woman leading study on this material and it is an issue for your group, you will have to do your best to resolve it. In the course overall, there will be at least one series of talks (on the Four Reminders) given by women on a women's retreat and a number of other modules are being compiled by women. So I think there is a reasonable balance of different voices in the course as a whole. If people are concerned about gender specific references, I think we will just need to encourage them to rise above them or make their own connections with the theme. Obviously, it will not be feasible to get Padmavajra or the Tiratanaloka team to re-give their talks and, at present, I think they are clearly the best material available on the topics.

There is something of a jump in format between weeks 5 and 6 as we move from Padmavajra's talks to an edited version of Bhante's seminar on the *Buddhavagga*. Some people may find this difficult or off-putting as the edited seminar extract is quite dense and does explore many of the individual Pāli words used in the text. It may be worth making the point that whilst we are not expecting people to learn Pāli, if we are studying the Dharma over a number of years (or longer!), having familiarity with at least some key Pāli terms can be both helpful and rewarding. But if this is a problem for your group, I wouldn't get too bogged down in it and I would just look at what Bhante says without dwelling on the Pāli too much. One other benefit of this approach, as I mention in the Student Notes, is that it does introduce people to Bhante's approach to Pāli texts and it is something that at least a few people may wish to follow up through Bhante's other seminars on Pāli texts.

In week 8, we move to another approach by reading original texts. I hope that by this time, people will be familiar with the basic text and the approach taken in week 8 (see below) will encourage your students to find their own connections and meanings in the words and symbols of the text. This method is one you could usefully apply to reading other traditional Buddhist texts.

## **Preparation**

Being as well known as it is, there is plenty of background study material available on the *Dhammapada*. Some of it is mentioned in the 'Student Material' anyway but it might be particularly worthwhile - if you have the time - to study Bhante's seminars on the *Dhammapada*. He gave one seminar on chapter 9 – 'Evil', and one seminar on chapters 14 and 20 – 'The Enlightened One' and 'The Way'. Obviously, I have excerpted some of the material from the *Buddhavagga* seminar (with the help of Vajrapriya and Vidyadevi) but the others demonstrate Bhante's method of exploring a text and contain some good material. They are both currently available on the text section of Free Buddhist Audio:

<http://tinyurl.com/dlot2c>

## Specific Suggestions

### *Week four*

You may want to lead meditative reflections on the three *lakṣaṇas*, rather than discuss them, or perhaps do some writing exercises on them. People should be familiar with them as ideas by now and reflection may be more effective than discussion.

### *Week six*

Verse 183 of the *Dhammapada* is chanted in the *Dhammapalam Gatha*. The verses of the *Dhammapalam Gatha* itself were chosen from the *Dhammapada* and other Pāli texts by Dr Ambedkar and they are frequently chanted in the Indian wing of our Movement (and unfortunately much less frequently elsewhere). You may wish to bring this to the attention of the group and briefly look at the text of the *Dhammapalam Gatha* which is found in the Puja Book. There is a recording by Chandrabodhi of the chanting of the *Dhammapalam Gatha* on Free Buddhist Audio which you may want to listen to and/or chant:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC27>

### *Week eight*

I suggest the following way of exploring Chapters 5 and 6 of the text. I did this on an Order/Mitra day in Bristol and it proved a very good way of getting people to read the text more closely for themselves. In a way, it provides a method for people to read traditional texts and find their own connections with it. It works best if you have a shrine room to do it in but I am sure you will be able to improvise if you don't have that facility. You can shorten or extend the timings depending on how much time you have.

1. Before you begin, make sure a copy of the *Dhammapada* is placed on the shrine, preferably wrapped in a beautiful cloth. You will also need pen and paper for each person.
2. Then begin as usual by chanting the *Tiratana Vandana* and then perhaps a short meditation of 10 or so minutes (depending on the overall time you have).
3. The person nearest the shrine can then stand up and take the copy of the *Dhammapada* from the shrine and sit down again.
4. Read all of chapters 5 and 6, passing the book around so everyone gets to read a few verses and the last person places the text back on the shrine. Then just sit for a couple of minutes.
5. Then ask people to go through both chapters verse by verse, making a written note of the teachings and images in each verse, e.g. for the first

verse of Chapter 5 you might just write, “Image of a sleepless night and a long, exhausting journey; the spiritually immature who don't understand the truth travel through repeated existences.” (or something similar to this). So the purpose is not to write anything original but just to focus, through writing, on the literal meaning of the text in front of you. I am sure this will provide a basis for people finding an image or teaching that does directly speak to them. This exercise may take between 15 and 20 minutes.

6. Either get people to go through what they have written in pairs or you can do it as one group making sure that they have not missed anything.
7. Ask them then to choose one verse from each chapter that particularly strikes them, either because of the image or the teaching contained in it. Once they have done this, get them to write both verses down on one A4 piece of paper (if you have time, you could do this in an 'illuminated' way, i.e. with colours, beautiful script and decoration but if you don't have time, this is not essential). You could also take some time for them to say why they have chosen those two particular verses.
8. Sit in meditation again and after a few minutes silence, go round with each person reading out, from the piece of paper in front of them, the two verses they have chosen. You could then finish with chanting the Śākyamuni mantra and making offerings.

Uddyotani – one of the peer-reviewers of the module – wrote the following notes which you may find helpful to consider before embarking on the module:

### **General**

There are a number of suggestions for bringing ritual and devotional practice into the module, e.g. reading, chanting, pūjā. I would suggest people consider using one or two of these but to use all of them might be too time consuming. I could see the benefit of making a connection with earlier material in the foundation year e.g. the *Tiratana Vandana* (which was new material which wasn't there when we had studied it), but would suggest this as background reading to the module as it didn't flow well into the module itself. The module has a lovely 'clean' start with the opening verses of the *Dhammapada* and doesn't really need anything preceding it.

### **On weeks 1 to 5**

The format worked well here and was well contained – i.e. one lecture per week. The questions were really helpful to have alongside the audio lecture as they prompted people to bring in their own thoughts and ideas. We didn't use all the questions each week, just used them as a starting point for discussion, along with anything else that came up from the talks.

Having a ‘directive’ question or two each week was good as it forced people to write and so commit themselves and show their views – e.g. making a list of maras in week 3 and further writing in week 4. Week 5 we felt was the weakest of the talks, with less of a clear point pulled out in the talk from quite a mixed collection of verses on Flowers. I suspect Padmavajra wanted to raise the subject of lust and desire, which would be really helpful with some groups (though covered in other modules?). I was studying this with a group of older women and this aspect seemed less immediately relevant. We chose this week to do the Dhammapada pūjā, bringing flowers and an element of beauty into our practice that week.

### **On weeks 6 and 7**

We appreciated the edited version of the seminar and the group responded well to the depth and detail of Sangharakshita’s presentation. Having said that, the breadth of material covered is tremendous, and because of this, rather hard to work with in a group. The amount of material to read each week isn’t too great, but it goes verse by verse through the *Buddhavagga* rather than developing a particular theme, and touches a lot of different subjects on the way. People were interested in the Pāli and how Sangharakshita went into the significance of certain terms, and wanted to go through the text in detail. I felt it was a shame to hurry them through it in order to ‘get through’ the material, and although I did try to keep up a pace it made people feel a bit pushed. We spent three weeks studying the two extracts and still didn’t finish. Perhaps because of the breadth of material, the questions felt less relevant for these weeks, as people found so much else to respond to.

So a couple of suggestions here would be either to reduce the amount of material or to allow more time; e.g. 4 weeks, perhaps missing off weeks 5 and 8. Doing it again, I would suggest people summarized the material, e.g. on to a sheet of A4 for each of the two weeks, with just a couple of points relating to each verse to help us keep orientated. Covering this material in its present form, on this timescale did feel rather unsatisfactory.

### **On week 8**

We didn’t do this, as we ran out of time. Whilst I think it would work well on a day retreat as you suggest, I’m not sure I would use it to introduce more material (i.e. further chapters of the Dhammapada), at this stage in the course – it really felt like we’d covered enough. How it would work, I think, would be as a way of revisiting the verses already covered in the module, and of getting people to move from study/analysis to reflection and devotion.

## **Concluding Puja**

You may wish to conclude the module with the following pūjā based on the *Dhammapada*:

### ***Dhammapada Pūjā***

(Compiled by Dharmacharinis on a Mitra Study Leaders' retreat on the *Dhammapada*, edited by Dhammadassin)

*Suggestion: Precede the pūjā by reading the first 6 verses of the Dhammapada in Bhante's translation in call and response.*

## **Devotion to the Buddha**

He is the conqueror  
who can never be conquered  
By what track can you reach him,  
the Buddha,  
the awakened one,  
free of all conditioning.  
Who can describe him in human language?  
the Buddha,  
the awakened one,  
free from the net of desires  
and the pollution of the poisons,  
free from all conditioning.

Blessed is the birth of the Buddha  
Blessed is the teaching of the Dhamma  
Blessed is the Sangha  
where all live in harmony.  
Blessed beyond measure are they  
who pay homage to those worthy of homage,  
who have gone beyond evil,  
shed all fear  
and crossed the river of sorrow  
to the other shore.

## ***Śākyamuni Mantra and Offerings***

## **Reverencing the Three Jewels**

Look upon the wise friend who shows up faults  
as a revealer of treasures.  
It is good to know such a friend  
Better than a hundred years of idleness

is one day spent with determination.  
Better to live one day wondering  
how all things arise and pass away.  
Better to live one hour seeing  
the one life beyond the way.  
Better to live one moment in the moment  
of the way beyond the way.  
In village or forest  
on the hills or in the plain  
wherever the noble ones live is delightful.  
Delightful are those forests  
where the worldly fail to find delight.  
There the noble ones are happy,  
content in beauty and truth,  
without need for distraction.

### **Longing for the Infinite**

Yellow leaves hang on your tree of life  
The messengers of death are waiting  
You are going to travel far away  
Have you made provision for the journey?  
Make an island for yourself  
Hasten and strive.  
Be wise  
You are at the end of your life  
You are going to meet death  
There is no resting place on your way  
and you have no provision for the journey.  
Make, therefore, an island for yourself  
Hasten and strive

Arise!  
Watch!  
Don't live a low life  
Don't follow wrong ideas,  
Don't sink into the world.  
There is no path in the sky  
and one who goes forth  
must find the inner path.

When you have seen  
the good of your soul  
Follow it with earnestness.  
Whoever goes on this path  
travels to the end of sorrow.

**Better than power over all the earth**

Better than going to heaven  
and better than dominion over all the worlds  
is the joy of one who enters the river of life  
that leads to nirvana.

### ***Refuges and Precepts***

#### **Abandoning evil**

Let no one think lightly of evil  
“It will not harm me” we say.  
Drop by drop the pitcher is filled  
and little by little  
the fool becomes filled with evil.  
The fool thinks his evil deed is sweet as honey  
until it bears its fruit when he suffers pain.  
The fool who knows his folly is wise so far,  
but how great is the folly  
of the fool who thinks himself wise.  
He suffers when he sees  
the results of his misdeeds.  
The evil doer suffers  
both in this world and the next.  
He suffers when he thinks  
about the evil he has done,  
and suffers when thinking  
of the evil path ahead.

Wilfully you have fed your own mischief.  
Soon it will crush you  
as the diamond crushes stone.  
You are the source  
of all purity and impurity:  
No-one purifies another.

#### **Rejoicings**

How joyful to look upon the awakened  
and to keep company with the wise.  
The awakened are few  
and hard to find.  
Happy is the house where a person finally wakes.  
Blessed is their birth.  
Blessed is the teaching of the way.  
Blessed is the understanding  
among those who follow it,

And blessed is their determination.  
Blessed are they  
who revere the awakened ones  
Blessed are those who follow the way.  
They are free from fear.  
They are free.  
They have crossed over the river of sorrow.

### **Delighting in the Truth**

The wise friend tells you  
where you have fallen  
and where you yet may fall -  
invaluable secrets!  
Follow that friend  
Follow the way.  
Drink deeply of the truth,  
Live in serenity and joy.  
The wise friend delights in the truth  
and follows the way of the awakened.  
That friend is like a lake -  
pure  
tranquil  
deep.

Want nothing.  
Where there is desire,  
say nothing.  
Happiness or sorrow  
whatever befalls you  
walk on untouched  
unattached in this world.  
The wise friend becomes like a light  
pure  
shining  
free.

*Suggestion: read verses 277 – 279 from Bhante’s translation of the Dhammapada in call and response.*

### **Completion of the voyage**

Complete the voyage  
go beyond sorrow.  
Let the fetters of life fall away  
and live in full freedom.  
The mindful strive always.

They have no fixed abode  
but leave home like swans from their lake.  
Like the flight of birds in the sky  
it is hard to follow the path of the selfless.  
They have no possessions  
but live in a world of freedom.  
Like the flight of birds in the sky  
it is hard to follow their path.  
Their senses both trained and spontaneous,  
they know the meaning of freedom.

### **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](mailto:vajrashura@gmail.com), and the URL of the forum is [www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum](http://www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum).