

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 1: Dharma Study as a Spiritual Practice

Introduction

The main aim of this course is to help people to improve their lives and mental states, rather than to give information about Buddhism for intellectual interest. But to practice the Dharma we need to know the Dharma, and Buddhist ideas have a transformative effect in their own right, by changing the way we see the world, and therefore the way we feel and act.

So this course will have a large element of reading texts, reflecting on texts, and talking about texts. But it is important that we do not approach this with our usual attitudes to what we call ‘study’, which can bring in a sense of competitiveness or inferiority, or engage just our critical, rational intellect, rather than our whole being.

The following text, based on a talk by Padmavajra, offers a more creative way of relating to what we sometimes call ‘study’ – seeing it as ‘talking the Dharma’, an essential and time-honoured spiritual practice that gives inspiration, develops wisdom, creates spiritual community, and gives us a context in which we can work on our habitual ways of being.

Talking the Dharma

(Based on the talk ‘Talking the Dharma’, by Padmavajra, with extra material.)

For the early Buddhists ‘talking the Dharma’ – Dharma-kathā – was an important practice. Dharma-kathā means talking about the Dharma, conversing on the basis of the Dharma, relating through the Dharma. It means using the ideas, the ideals, the formulations, and the symbols of the Dharma as the medium for communication.

In the *Meghiya Sutta*, the Buddha describes Dharma-kathā as one of the five things – along with meditation - that, ‘when the Heart’s Release is immature, conduce to its maturity.’ Talking the Dharma is as important as meditation. It is not an optional extra.

At this point someone will usually object that experiencing the truth in Buddhism is supposed to be about getting beyond words and concepts. But ‘invoking the wordless’ prematurely will not liberate us on its own. Before we ‘invoke the wordless’ we need to free ourselves from the tangle of imprisoning concepts and world-views we have already taken on without knowing it. We gradually replace these unconscious views with ideas we have consciously chosen, which are liberating and help us live a spiritually vital life. Only when we have done this can

we go beyond concepts altogether. If we ‘invoke the wordless’ too early, before we have gone through this process, we will simply remain imprisoned in the net of unconscious views we have picked up from our family, friends, education, society and so on. To quote *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, ‘We use words to get free from words, until we reach the pure wordless Essence’.

Exposure to the Dharma is transformative

When we study a text that originates from the mind of someone more spiritually developed than ourselves we enter their mind – we enter a higher world. In a study group we can spend some time with our spiritual friends living in this higher world, helping each other to experience it as fully as possible. This exposure to a higher world is a transformative experience. It can put us in higher states as surely as any meditation practice. It can even lead us directly to Insight. In the Pali Canon there are more cases of people breaking through to a new level as the result of exposure to the Dharma than as the result of meditation! (Later examples include Hui Neng and Sangharakshita, both of whom experienced Insight as a result of exposure to the *Diamond Sūtra*).

To benefit from this transformative effect of the Dharma we need to approach it in the right way. We need to remember that we are entering another higher world, and to be open to the atmosphere and magic, rather than simply focusing on the concepts.

We also need to approach with an attitude of respect, acknowledging that the text originates from a being who is more developed than ourselves. If we dislike aspects of what is being said we need to be open to the possibility that our reactions may say more about us than they do about Reality. This doesn’t mean we must agree slavishly, but we need to keep an open mind, and be willing to try out unfamiliar ways of looking at the world. To approach a text in this way is an insight practice in its own right. Often our views are more connected with conditioning than with in-depth reflection. If we don’t like an idea it can be very helpful to ask ourselves why this is. If we are honest the real answer may be “because I think of myself as such and such a sort of person”, “because all my education emphasised a different view”, “because everyone else in the circles I move in thinks differently”, or “because if I really took this on I would have to change in ways I am not yet ready to do.” Becoming honest with ourselves in this way is a step to freeing ourselves from our fixed self view, an important aspect of Insight.

Dharma study gives inspiration

When we immerse ourselves in a Dharma text we enter the world of a more developed mind. We enter a higher world, and visiting a higher world is inspiring, if also challenging! We can make study more inspiring for ourselves and others by preparing a few points we want to bring out in the group. These could be points from the text we find particularly inspiring or eye-opening, things from our experience that illustrate what is being talked about, or ways the text could help us

practice. Thinking of these before the meeting is an act of generosity towards the group, and if everyone prepares in this way the study will be lively and inspiring.

Dharma study is the way we develop wisdom

Traditionally there are three steps to developing Wisdom:

- Śruta-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from hearing and learning
- Cinta-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from thinking and reflecting
- Bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from meditative development

The last of these is ‘real’ Wisdom, but for just about all normal beings the others are essential steps, without which the last wisdom never happens.

Śruta-mayī-prajñā

We need to hear and learn the basic teachings. As practising Buddhists we need to know the basic formulations off by heart – the precepts, the hindrances, the levels of Going for Refuge, the levels of wisdom, and so on. When we know these things off by heart they become a part of our thinking, and part of the way we live in the world. This is the most basic function of study.

To develop this level of wisdom we need first of all to be clear about what the study text is saying, independent of our reactions to it. To do this we will normally need to make notes, simplifying down to the main points and the main Dharmic formulations. This will allow us to go into the study group confident that we know the important points, and able to give a summary for the rest of the group if asked.

Some people who have had an unfortunate experience of formal education have difficulty with this process. This is an area where members of the Sangha can help each other. If the process of reading and note-taking is difficult, it is very helpful to go through the text with someone else, picking out the main points, as a way of overcoming lack of confidence or experience in this area.

Cintā-mayī-prajñā

This level of wisdom arises from thinking and reflecting. This includes reflecting on the Dharma on our own, but discussing a text with other Buddhists is also an effective way of developing this level of wisdom - for most people it is an essential part of the process. We get the benefit of many different temperaments, many different life-experiences, many different imaginations, and so we see what is being talked about from many different angles. It can also be easier to maintain a high level of interest and energy in a discussion than when reflecting on one’s own. We can all contribute to this process of exploration by coming armed with some main points we want to emphasise, as suggested earlier.

Bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā

Sometimes a Dharma study group will seem to take off into magical territory – a joint exploration of the Truth, where ego is forgotten, where we seem to be one mind with many bodies, and where we get an idea of the living, life-changing spiritual truth behind the words of the teachings. This is bordering on bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā. Usually we need the clarity and focus of meditation to develop this level of wisdom in its fullness, but when this does come about it is usually as the result of a deep experience of the previous levels: we know the Dharma at the intellectual level, we have reflected on it deeply, it has become part of our thinking, it has seeped into our bones. Then when we meditate on it, it transmutes us into another being entirely.

Dharma study helps us develop Sangha

Dharma study is an opportunity to relate to other Buddhists in a Dharmic context, which reminds us to relate on the basis of our highest selves – relating from our own highest self, to the highest self of the other. This relating to one another on the basis of what is highest within us is one definition of Sangha. An important aim of a study group is to create a mini-Sangha on this basis. Talking with others about the Dharma is often more helpful in this respect than talking about football, politics, everyday events, or our personal problems, all of which tend to bring up the old normal lower self we present in the everyday world.

Study groups are ways to work on ourselves

What usually gets in the way of developing Sangha in any group situation is our conditioned reactivity, and the fact that other people ‘push our buttons’. A Dharma study group is an excellent place to work on this, because it is safe, supportive, challenging, and constantly reminds us that our reactions are there to be transcended, not indulged. Building Sangha is an exercise in self-awareness and self-transcendence.

Study pushes buttons, and groups of people push us into habitual roles. We need to focus as much on how we *are* in the group – especially the effect we have on others - as on the ideas being discussed.

Possible reactions in the study situation include competitiveness, argumentativeness, shyness, withdrawal, anger at unfamiliar ideas, and so on.

Possible roles include rebel, wannabee leader, good boy or girl, devil’s advocate, superior observer, know-all, show-off, cynic, and joker.

We need to ask ourselves, what are our habitual reactions and roles in the group? We need to find ways to stay ‘in the gap’ with regard to these. And we need to look for more creative ways of being in the group that create harmony and a sense of shared inspiration. If we treat it in this way, being part of the study group

becomes an exercise in mindfulness, mettā, communication, and transcending our old habitual ways of being - it becomes a powerful way of practising the Dharma in its own right.

Notes

1. The Pali Canon is the collected record of the Buddha's discourses and the rules of monastic life recorded in the Pali language, which forms the basis for the teachings of the Theravada School of South-east Asia.