

a guide to  
**becoming a mitra**  
in the Triratna Buddhist Community

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# Introduction

If you are thinking about becoming a mitra in the Triratna Buddhist Community, or if you think you might want to do so at some time in the future, this booklet may help you.

Its aims are:

To give you a better idea of the meaning and importance of becoming a mitra,

To help you decide whether you want to take this step, and

To explain how you should go about becoming a mitra if you decide you would like to do so.

The booklet also answers some frequently asked questions about the mitra system, which might be helpful to anyone who wants to know more about it.

## What is a mitra?

The Sanskrit word ‘mitra’ simply means ‘friend’. Becoming a mitra is a deepening of your friendship with the Triratna Buddhist Order, which can occur when your commitment to its ideals, values and practices has reached a certain level. Mitras are people who have made what we call a ‘provisional’ commitment to practicing the Dharma within our spiritual community. This involves a commitment to Buddhism, to practicing the Buddhist path as taught within our tradition, and to the Triratna Buddhist Community as the main context for your practice.

We call this level of commitment ‘provisional’ because it is ‘for the foreseeable future’, rather than the more once-and-for-all dedication of an order member. You are ready to become a mitra when you decide that, as far as you can see at the moment, you want to practise **this** path, with **this** spiritual community. You are saying that from where you are now this looks like the path for you, and you are willing to give it a good wholehearted trial.

Becoming a mitra is a significant event in our spiritual lives, so it is marked by a significant public ceremony, which is a special event at the Buddhist centre, and to which many people invite their friends and family.

## Why become a mitra?

In the spiritual life, what we get out of it depends on what we put in. You will probably have noticed this in your meditation practice, to take just one example. If we sit down to meditate without fully committing ourselves to the practice, we are likely to drift and daydream. But when we sit down to meditate with decisiveness and confidence; we set up the conditions that allow something positive to unfold.

What is true of meditation is true of the spiritual life in general. To get the full benefit of the teachings of the Dharma we need to practise them wholeheartedly, and wholeheartedness can only come from decisiveness and confidence. So making a definite commitment of the sort required to become a mitra is an important stepping stone in our spiritual progress, which can propel our practice to a new level. And the fact that we do this publicly makes it more real, and therefore more powerful.

When we take this step a new range of opportunities open up for us – the most obvious is the Dharma Training Course for Mitras, and there are also many other mitra events and retreats at centres, and around the Triratna Buddhist Community. When people with a certain level of experience and engagement come together they can go further than is possible in situations that are open to all comers, because a solid foundation can be taken for granted. And when people of a certain level of commitment come together they can inspire each other, like smouldering pieces of wood that, when brought together, blaze into a fire that is greater than its individual parts. For all these reasons, mitra activities like the Dharma Training Course allow us to enter a new and deeper phase in our spiritual progress.

## The Three Declarations

To help you (and us!) to think clearly about whether you are ready to become a mitra, we ask you to consider whether you can honestly make three ‘declarations’. The origin of the word ‘declaration’ has to do with ‘making clear’, and deciding that you can (or cannot) make these three declarations makes it clear where you stand, both to yourself and to others.

The three declarations are:

“I feel that I am a Buddhist,”

“I am trying to practise the five precepts,” and

“I feel that the Triratna Buddhist Community is the main context in which I want to deepen my practice.”

We also ask that before thinking about becoming a mitra you should come to Buddhist events regularly for at least six months. (Coming to bodywork events, or events that just involve meditation, with no element of wider Dharma teaching, would not normally count.) Unless you have been coming to Dharma events for a reasonable length of time you cannot be expected to know enough about our tradition to be able to commit yourself to it.

We will explore what the three declarations imply in more detail in the next few sections of this booklet.

### ***“I feel that I am a Buddhist.”***

This declaration means that you have come to feel a sense of identification with the Buddhist tradition; in down-to-earth terms, it might mean that you would write ‘Buddhist’ on an official form that asked for your religion.

This feeling of identification is different for different people. Some people might feel quite strongly that the Buddha represents their spiritual ideal. For others it will mean that the teachings of the Dharma seem obviously true – the teachings make sense, and the practices work. For some people, it is the intangible “atmosphere” of Buddhism that they connect with. We may just know that Buddhism is the right path for us, with a sort of heart-knowledge, without being able to express our reasons clearly. Others may have a strong response to Buddhist images, such as images of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, which points to a similar sort of intuitive connection.

Whatever your sense of connection to Buddhism feels like to you, if you ‘think of yourself as a Buddhist’ you will be experiencing the beginnings of a Buddhist perspective on life. This will probably include an understanding that your true wellbeing depends more on positive mental states, a meaningful life, and involvement with the Sangha, than it does on material wealth or consumption.

Buddhism is different from most ‘isms’ in that it is not a set of theories and beliefs so much as a path of practice, and a tradition that transmits this path and makes it possible to follow it. So ‘being a Buddhist’ does not mean we have to accept a credo of beliefs, it means we are working to grow and develop, using the tools passed down in the Buddhist tradition – which brings us to the second of the declarations.

### ***“I am trying to practise the Five Precepts”***

Because Buddhism is a path of practice rather than a creed, there is not much point in just thinking of ourselves as a Buddhist unless we also put the Dharma into practice in our lives. At the most essential and fundamental level, this means moving more and more in the direction of practicing the Five Precepts. The Five Precepts represent the fundamental principles of living as a Buddhist – living with kindness, generosity, simplicity, integrity, and awareness. So the most basic test of whether our commitment to Buddhism is genuine is whether we are trying to practise the Precepts. This means that we are putting effort into moving in the direction that the Precepts point out for us, not that we already practise them perfectly – only an Enlightened being could do that.

If you have been coming to Dharma events at a centre regularly for more than six months you will already be very familiar with the Five Precepts, but for those who need a reminder, we could sum up the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ aspects of the Five Precepts as follows:

1. Not harming other sentient beings,  
but actively practising kindness.
2. Not taking that which another is unwilling to give,  
but actively practising generosity.
3. Not indulging our sexual (or other) cravings in ways that harm others or ourselves,  
but actively cultivating stillness, simplicity, and contentment.
4. Not speaking falsely,  
but making a definite practice of honesty.
5. Not clouding our mind with drink or drugs,  
but actively cultivating mindfulness and awareness.

The Precepts are not commandments - they are often described as ‘training principles’ – and you do not have to practice them perfectly to become a mitra. However the Five Precepts do express the basic principles of a Buddhist life, so before becoming a mitra it is important that you:

**Accept** them as your guide to living a skilful life,

**Aspire** to express them more and more fully, and

**Make effort** to put this aspiration into practice – even if your progress in this direction seems very gradual and imperfect.

As well as trying to practise the Five Precepts, most mitras will also be trying to keep up an effective daily practice of meditation. But, as with most aspects of being a mitra, there are no hard and fast rules about this. People’s circumstances

vary, and for some people keeping up a regular practice is more difficult than for others. As with the practice of the Five Precepts, what is important is that you are genuinely trying to move in the direction of practising the Dharma more and more fully.

***“I feel that the Triratna Buddhist Community is the main context in which I want to deepen my practice.”***

We all need a concrete, living context for our practice of the Dharma - nobody can do it in isolation. We all need the friendship, encouragement, support, and inspiration we can only get from other likeminded people. We all need the guidance of those who have been practicing longer than we have. And, when we want to really get somewhere with our practice, we all need to decide to give one particular version of the path a fair trial, rather than practising now a bit from one tradition, and now a bit from another. (There is a traditional analogy for this generally accepted spiritual fact: if we want to dig a well to find water, we need to dig a deep hole in one place, not a series of shallow holes - even if water can be found in many different places.)

So when we want to get serious about getting down to the water of the spiritual life, we need to opt for one particular context, one particular spiritual community, and one particular version of the path, at least for the foreseeable future. You are ready to become a mitra when you are ready to do this: when you have decided that this is the spiritual community for you, and this is the path for you. This does not necessarily mean that you think that this is the only true path, or even that it is the best path for everyone. It simply means that you see it as the best path for you, and the best Sangha for you, as far as you can see.

It might help you to decide whether this is the Sangha for you if we spell out some of the things that distinguish us from other Buddhist groups you might come across. Triratna Buddhism is a distinct tradition in its own right, with its own distinct version of the path, which has evolved to meet the needs of people living in contemporary developed societies, taking into account our culture, conditioning, and needs. You need to take our particular emphases into account as you ask yourself why you should be a Triratna Buddhist, rather than joining one of the many other Buddhist groups that you could find in any just about any city in the developed world.

## **Some features of the Triratna Buddhist Community**

### ***An ‘ecumenical‘ tradition***

‘Ecumenical’ in the spiritual context it is used to describe those things that express unity between different sects and schools. The Triratna Buddhist Community is ecumenical in the sense that we try to see beyond the many different traditional formulations of the Dharma, to the fundamental truths which underlie them all. So we try not to identify the Dharma solely with any of the traditional schools, or with any of the different national cultures in which the various eastern sects are embodied. We are not Tibetan Buddhists, or Zen Buddhists, or Pure Land Buddhists, or Theravada Buddhists – we try to take the fundamental Dharma that lies behind all these, and practise it in a way that works for us, here and now. Our understanding of this ‘fundamental Dharma’ is based on the experience and insight of our founder, Sangharakshita, an

Englishman who spent many years as a monk in the Theravada school of South-east Asia, and also had teachers from the Tibetan and Chinese traditions.

Being ecumenical in this sense means that we can derive inspiration from the whole Buddhist tradition, and use a range of teachings and practices from different schools. But we do not do this in a spirit of spiritual consumerism, each taking the parts from the different traditions that appeal to us. We have evolved a distinct, coherent path of our own, which takes account of the needs of people living in the contemporary world.

### ***The importance of friendship and Sangha***

One very distinctive feature of the Triratna community is the importance we give to spiritual friendship, and in particular the importance we place on what we call ‘horizontal’ friendship – that is, friendship with people who are at more or less the same stage of practice as ourselves. Many eastern schools emphasise the ‘vertical’ relationship with the teacher, but generally ‘horizontal’ friendships are not stressed, perhaps because they can be taken for granted in traditional societies. But in contemporary societies, with their tendency to isolation and individualism, we need to stress the crucial role of friendship in the spiritual life. Friendship is an essential part of the way we grow. It helps us to transcend our egoism, releasing us into a wider world of solidarity with others. Spiritual friendship helps us to let go of the barriers of self-protection and self-delusion we place around our idea of ourselves, and lets us see ourselves more clearly. Ultimately the goal of the Buddhist path is to go beyond our limited egocentricity, and become a friend to the world – which we can only do if we start by becoming a friend to at least a few real people around us.

In keeping with our emphasis on friendship, we also stress the importance of the spiritual community, and the need to join with others to create an effective and supportive Sangha. To make progress we need to work on ourselves, but we also need to come together with others to create the sort of environment that makes progress possible – without that, none of us will succeed. So we need to see Enlightenment not just as something we gain for ourselves, but also as something we create together.

### ***The centrality of ‘Going for Refuge’...***

The Triratna Buddhist Community differs from many traditional Eastern schools in what we see as central to being a Buddhist. Many of the traditional schools see a particular lifestyle or practice as central - for example the monastic life, or a particular meditation practice or chant. But in the Triratna Community, what is central is being committed to growth and development - “Going for Refuge” in traditional terms - rather than a particular lifestyle or practice. So order members may live a variety of lifestyles and practice in a variety of ways, according to their needs, temperaments and circumstances - what unites them is their commitment to the ideals of Buddhism, to the path, and to the spiritual community.

### ***...and some others.***

Some of the other distinctive features of the Triratna Buddhist Community include the emphasis we place on the arts as a means of spiritual growth, and the importance we put on creating real-world contexts in which Buddhists can live and work together, such as our communities and team-based businesses. Ultimately we cherish the ideal of creating the ‘New Society’, in which all the aspects of the way we live our lives feed our inspiration and help our progress.

Finally we need to mention the value that the Triratna Community places on single-sex situations, and the fact that most mitra activities are single-sex. Mitra activities like the Dharma Training Course are not just opportunities to learn about the Dharma in an intellectual way, they are also opportunities to practise it – which includes deepening our communication, developing spiritual friendships, and creating spiritual community. This involves opening up to others in a way that is easier in single sex situations, and requires us to leave behind traditional gender roles, which tend to be kept in place by dual-sex situations.

Experience tells us that while some people find the idea of single sex activities strange or even threatening at first, almost everyone who becomes a mitra ends up valuing single-sex situations, and will opt for them given the choice. As with any spiritual practice, the proof is in the results, and until we have tried it we cannot pass judgement - so keep an open mind, and try it for yourself.

## **How do I become a mitra?**

If you think that you can honestly make the three declarations, your next step is to talk to the mitra convenor at your local centre. A mitra convenor is an order member who has a special responsibility for looking after the Dharmic needs of mitras at a centre, and for encouraging the health of the mitra Sangha. Most centres have at least two, one for men and one for women. If you do not know who your mitra convenor is, just ask any order member to put you in touch. In centres with no mitra convenor, the Chair takes on this role, and you will need to talk to them, or else to somebody they designate.

The mitra convenor will want to meet with you to answer any questions you may have, and to talk over any concerns. They will also want to make sure that you understand the meaning of being a mitra, and the significance of the three declarations. When you are sure that you want to become a mitra, and they are sure that you understand and can genuinely make the three declarations, they will arrange a mitra ceremony.

## **The mitra ceremony**

Becoming a mitra is marked by a public ceremony - the format of this may differ from centre to centre. Often several people will become mitras at once. A mitra ceremony is an important event in the life of a centre, at which friends, existing mitras, and Order members will welcome you into the mitra Sangha. Many people also invite their friends and family to witness them taking this step, so the event will be made as accessible to non-Buddhists as possible.

Normally your only special role in the ritual aspect of the ceremony is to make three offerings to the shrine - a stick of incense, a flower, and a candle. The three offerings have a traditional meaning: the flower symbolises beauty and impermanence, the candle symbolises the light of wisdom, and the incense symbolises the effects of an ethical life, which spreads out from the practitioner to affect all those around them, and the world at large.

The mitra convenor will explain the details of the ceremony as it is performed at your centre. They will also liaise with you about dates, make any necessary arrangements, and answer any questions you may have. It may take a few months before a ceremony can be arranged, as there are usually only a few such ceremonies every year at most centres, to make sure that they are special occasions.

You may find that the effects of this ceremony surprise you. Recently we have rather lost the habit, but since the dawn of time human beings have marked significant 'rites of passage' with public rituals like this, for the simple reason that they

have a profound effect, cementing and intensifying the inner change that they celebrate. Rituals tell our unconscious depths that something significant has happened, and get them on the side of the internal shift that has taken place. They also tell other people, and get them on our side too. Our decision to be a Buddhist becomes part of public reality when we share it with others, and it takes on a new depth and weight. Finally, the mitra ceremony is important for the whole Sangha, and we take part in it not just for our own sake, but to mark the fact that we have decided to be part of a project that is bigger than ourselves.

## **What then?**

When you become a mitra, if at all possible you will be invited to take part in the Dharma Training Course for Mitras. This normally takes four years to complete, and provides a firm grounding in the ideas and practices of the Dharma. As a mitra you do not have to take part in this course, but most new mitras choose to do so if they have the opportunity. If you want to do the course the mitra convenor will try to arrange for you to join a mitra group as soon as possible. They may not always be able to get you a place straight away, and at smaller centres Order members will have to do the best they can for you with limited resources. If you cannot join a mitra group it may be possible to cover the material by correspondence or over the web, but remember that coming together with other mitras is a crucially important aspect of doing the course, and you should join a group rather than study on your own if this is possible.

As a mitra you will want to take your spiritual life further and deeper, and the order members at your centre will be able to take more of an interest in helping you to do this. One thing they will encourage you to do is to go on retreat. If you have not done so already, as a mitra you will ideally be getting into the retreat habit, maybe starting by just going on a weekend event, then graduating to longer retreats. Retreats can provide the ideal conditions to deepen your practice, and as a mitra you will ideally take advantage of this opportunity as often as your circumstances and responsibilities allow.

When you become a mitra you are becoming part of a spiritual community. This is a two way process – you will receive many benefits from the Sangha, but your membership of the Sangha will only be real to the extent that you take a role in creating it, by making your own contribution. This contribution may take the form of helping out at the centre by giving time, energy or expertise. It may take the form of contributing financially. For all mitras it will take the form of making the effort to be part of the life of the local centre, by simply going to classes and events, for the sake of others if not for yourself. As with most aspects of the mitra system there are no hard and fast rules about how you should contribute to your local situation, but if you limit your involvement with the centre to just doing the mitra course, you will have lost sight of the spirit of Sangha that is such an important part of our path, and you will benefit less as a result.

## FAQ's

### **I've been practicing for years with another Buddhist tradition (or: I've been meditating for years; or, I've read lots of books and know a lot about the Dharma). Why do I have to come to the centre for 6 months before I can become a mitra?**

The Triratna Buddhist Community has its own well-defined version of the path, designed to meet the needs of people living in the contemporary world. While it allows us to draw inspiration from the whole range of Buddhism throughout the world, it is a distinct tradition in its own right, and you need to get some direct experience of it before you can decide it is for you.

### **Do I need to believe in rebirth (or anything else) to become a mitra?**

Buddhism is more of a system of practice than a set of beliefs, so you don't have to believe in rebirth, for example, to be a Buddhist. However there are some ideas that are so central to the Dharma that it would not make sense to call yourself a Buddhist unless you thought they were true. These include the idea that we can change, and the idea that what we do now has a powerful effect on the person we become in the future – the so-called 'law of karma.' Unless you believe in these ideas the practices of Buddhism do not make sense.

### **I still take recreational drugs and/or drink alcohol. Does this mean I can't become a mitra?**

The second declaration is that we are trying to practice the Five Precepts, not that we already practice them perfectly, so there are no fixed rules about this. To be a mitra you should at least accept the principle that taking fewer intoxicants would benefit your practice of mindfulness, and you should be prepared to move in this direction over time. As your practice develops you will almost certainly find yourself becoming generally happier and more at ease, and you may come to dislike the feeling of dulling your awareness, so that you will naturally want to drink less alcohol and/or take fewer drugs.

### **I am not a vegetarian. Does this mean I can't become a mitra?**

As with the previous question, there are no hard and fast rules about this. To become a mitra you need to accept the fundamental Buddhist principle of living with kindness, and of trying to do as little harm to other beings as possible. If you accept this principle, over time you will want to move in the direction of causing less suffering to sentient beings through your eating habits.

### **Can I still visit other teachers and traditions outside the FWBO if I'm a mitra?**

The third declaration asks us whether we see the Triratna Community as our main Sangha. It does not ask us to cut off all contact with other groups and we can still go to talks and events organised by other traditions. But our practice will be more effective if we can give our time, energy and trust to our own Sangha. For this reason it is usually best not to go on retreats with other groups or teachers. If you intend to go on retreat with another tradition after becoming a mitra please talk this over with your mitra convenor, so you can explore with them your reasons for doing so, and also discuss the reasons behind the recommendation to stick with Triratna retreats.

## **I don't want to take part in a public ceremony. Can I still become a mitra?**

There are no hard and fast rules about this, but you should ask yourself why you don't want a public ceremony. If it is because you don't want to publicly 'come out' as a Buddhist, you might ask yourself whether you are really ready to make the three declarations. You might reflect that the ceremony is not something we do just for ourselves, but is important for the whole Sangha. And you might consider the fact that without the public, 'rite of passage' aspect of the ceremony, becoming a mitra is likely to be less meaningful for you, and have a less powerful effect on your practice. The mitra convenor will want to discuss these issues with you, and they will use their discretion.

## **Who decides whether I can become a mitra – me or the mitra convenor?**

When you become a mitra you are joining a community, which is a two-sided process – you need to want to join, and the community also needs to accept you. The mitra convenor has the responsibility of deciding whether you are ready and able to join the mitra Sangha - in practical terms this will mainly mean making sure that you understand the meaning of the three declarations, and that you know enough about the Triratna Buddhist Community to decide it is for you. They will also be able to help you by answering any questions you may have.

# Appendix

## *Resources and useful links*

**FreeBuddhistaudio.com/study** - for online access to the Dharma Training Course for Mitras

**FreeBuddhistaudio.com** - for online access to tapes and videos on the Buddhism including the Dharma Training Course for Mitras

**TheBuddhistCentre.com** – due to be fully functioning later in 2011, this vibrant new website is being developed to communicate our community and Buddhist teachings on-line. The aim is to give a strong sense of both the unity and diversity of the movement by offering a common entrance point to the plethora of Triratna sites.

**GoingOnRetreat.com** - for easy access to retreat information for various Triratna UK Retreat Centres.

## *Activities for younger Sangha members*

Over the 40+years of the orders life its average age has crept up from twenty something to fifty something. We need to make sure our Sangha contains the maturity of age, the energy of youth and the inspiration of both!

Self-organising young Buddhists' Groups have formed in some places – they organise events specifically for younger Sangha members, including annual national weekend retreats. Ask at your local Triratna Buddhist centre or check out the Young Triratna Buddhists **facebook** group.

## *Triratna Development Fund*

This booklet was funded by the European Chairs' Assembly which runs the Triratna Development Fund, giving money to projects that serve the whole Triratna community, helping it grow and thrive.

Examples of projects currently being funded include the International Sangha Retreat, the International Urban Retreat, younger Sangha members' initiatives, the Dharma Training Course for mitras, the BiddhistCentre.com website, Free Buddhist Audio, Clear Vision and Windhorse Publications.

There are so many more things we could do with greater resources. For example we'd like to be able to help pioneers founding Buddhist centres in new countries and locations, fund translations of Dharma books into new languages, and produce teaching resources including on-line audio-visual materials so that many more people, especially young people, might come across the Buddha's message.

To make a donation, please go to **JustGiving.com/Triratna** or see **TriratnaDevelopment.org/can-you-help** for more details