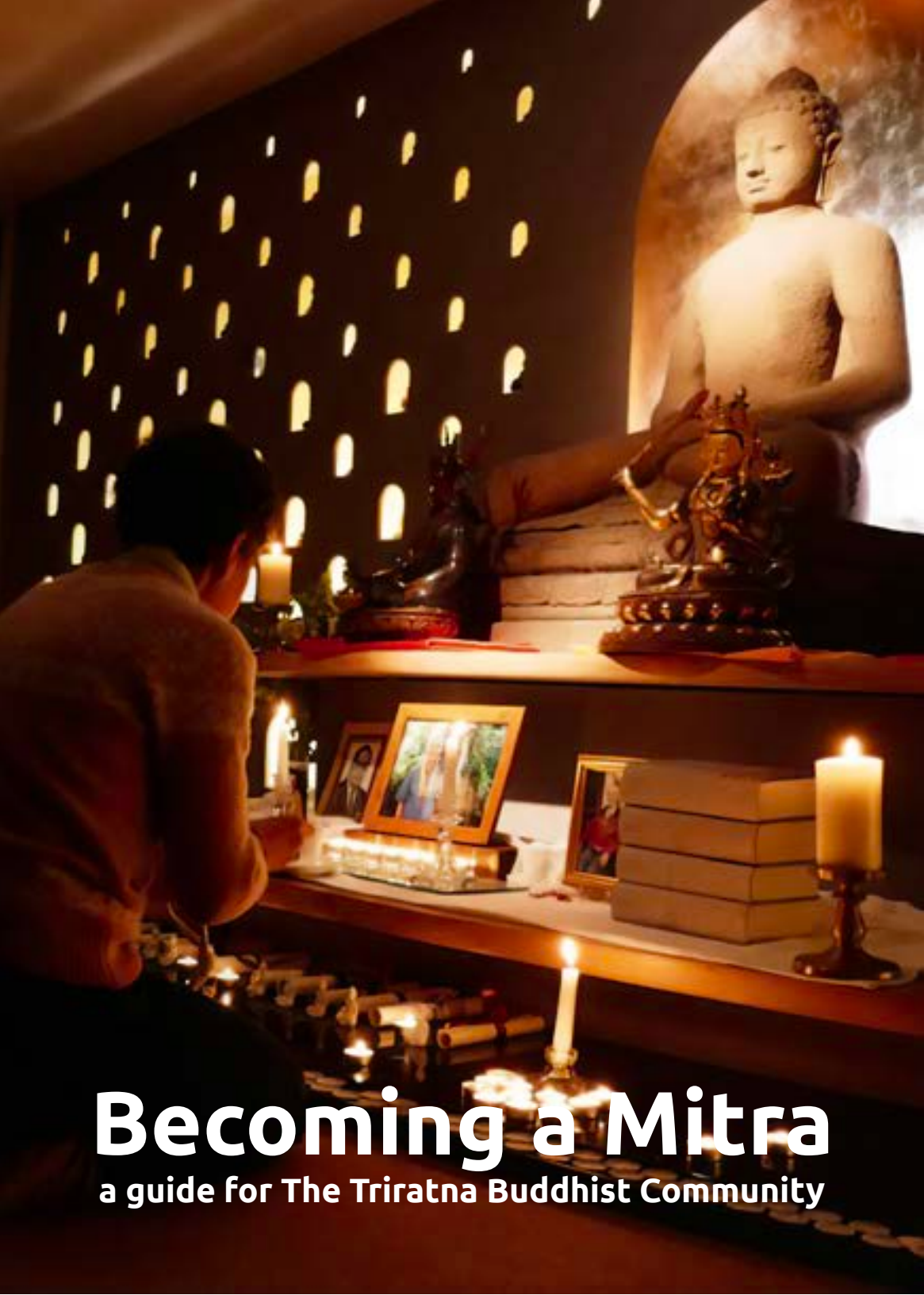




Becoming a Mitra

a guide for 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
- help you decide whether you want to take this step
- 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 practising the Dharma within our spiritual community. This involves a commitment to Buddhism, to practising 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 practice this path, with this spiritual community. You are saying that 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 public ceremony, which is a special event at a Buddhist centre, 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 for 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 practice them wholeheartedly, and wholeheartedness can only come from decisiveness and confidence. Making the commitment 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, we can start to engage with Mitra events and retreats at centres, and throughout the Triratna Buddhist Community. We can also go deeper with the Dharma Training Course for Mitras. 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 everyone, because a solid and shared 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 the local Order Members 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:

1. I am a Buddhist.
2. I am practicing the five precepts.
3. 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 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 point to a similar 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 (the Buddhist word for spiritual community), than it does on material wealth or status.

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 makes clear this path and so makes it possible to follow it. Being a Buddhist does not mean we have to accept a set 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 practicing the five precepts

Because Buddhism is a path of practice rather than a set of beliefs, 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 practising *the five precepts*. The five precepts represent the fundamental principles of living as a Buddhist; living with kindness, generosity, simplicity, integrity, and awareness. The most basic test of whether our commitment to Buddhism is genuine is whether we are trying to practice 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 practice 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 may already be 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 the mind with drink or drugs,
but actively cultivating mindfulness and awareness.

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 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,
- 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 practice 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 meditation and the Dharma more and more fully.

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 friendship, encouragement, support, and inspiration, and we all need the guidance of those who have been practising longer than we have. When we really want to get somewhere with our practice, we need to decide to give one particular version of the path a fair attempt, rather than practising now a bit from one tradition, and then 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. To get down to the deeper 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 may have already realised that the spiritual community is created and developed by those who are relatively more committed. Deciding to become a Mitra in the Triratna community means that you wish to both participate in, and to develop the Sangha. Which means, to the best of your ability, considering how to contribute your time, energy, and money, to help create the spiritual fellowship we all enjoy.

You are ready to become a Mitra when you have decided that this is the spiritual community for you, and this is the path for you, and you are moved to help support the Sangha, as best you can, through your own efforts. This does not necessarily mean that you think that this is the only true path, the best path for everyone or even the best Sangha. 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 traditions 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 societies, taking into account our culture, conditioning, and needs. You need to take the things we emphasise into account as you ask yourself why you should be a Triratna Buddhist, rather than joining one of the many other Buddhist traditions that you could find in just about any city in the world.



Features of the Triratna buddhist Community, an ecumenical tradition

Ecumenical in the spiritual context 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 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. We can only do this if we start by becoming a friend to 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. We need to see the conditions for Enlightenment not just as something we create 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 might be emphasised. 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.

Other features

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 a new society, in which all the different aspects of the way we live our lives feed our inspiration and progress.

Finally we need to mention the value that the Triratna Community places on single-sex gatherings, and the fact that most Mitra activities take place in single-sex contexts. 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 practice it, which includes deepening our communication, developing spiritual friendships, and creating spiritual community. This involves opening up to others in a way that can be easier in single-sex situations, and requires us to leave behind traditional gender roles.

Very often we play out gender roles unconsciously, and do not realise it until we spend time in a single-sex context. 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 contexts. As with any spiritual practice, the proof is in the results, and until we have tried it we cannot pass judgement. So it's good to keep an open mind, and try it for yourself.

For people who do not identify as either male or female, or are questioning their gender identity, this approach can be difficult. There are gender diverse groups and events, and discussions are continuing at all levels of the Triratna Community on how to welcome and support gender-diverse people. You can talk with your local Mitra convenor(s) about how to find a group that would work for you.



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 spiritual well-being of the Mitras. Most Centres have 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. If you are in a smaller group with no Mitra convenor or chair, or you are part of an online study group and not connected to a physical Centre, then you should approach the Order Member who runs your group. They can follow up with the men's or women's Mitra convenors steering groups to determine the process for your particular situation.



The Mitra ceremony

Becoming a Mitra is marked by a public ceremony which is conducted by the chair of the Centre, symbolising that we will become a Mitra in relation to the whole Triratna Sangha. The format of the ceremony may differ from Centre to Centre and often several people will become Mitras at once. A Mitra ceremony is an important event in the life of a centre, at which friends in the Sangha, Mitras, and Order Members will welcome you into the Mitra community. Many people also invite their friends and family to witness them taking this step, so the event will be made as accessible as possible to non-Buddhists.

Normally your only special role in the ritual aspect of the ceremony is to make the three traditional offerings to the shrine. These are a flower, a candle and a stick of incense. The three offerings have a profound meaning. The flower symbolises the truth of impermanence. Although the flower is fresh and blooming now, it soon passes away. The candle symbolises the light of the Buddha's wisdom, which we aspire to light within our own heart. The incense symbolises the effects of our ethical actions that, like incense, pervade the world around us.

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 and other arrangements, and answer any questions you may have. It may take a while before a ceremony can be arranged, as at most Centres there are only a few such ceremonies every year, to ensure that they remain 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, supporting and intensifying the inner change that they celebrate.

Rituals tell our unconscious depths that something significant has happened; that an internal shift has taken place. They also relay that to other people, so they can support us. Our decision to be a Buddhist becomes real 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. Once you've had your ceremony, you will be welcomed and accepted as a Mitra in any Triratna Buddhist Centre you visit anywhere in the world.



What next?

An important aspect of Triratna culture is coming together to study the Dharma. One expression of this is the four-year Dharma Training Course, which gives a comprehensive overview of the Triratna tradition. You may already have been doing this as part of a Year one group, in which case you can continue, or you will be invited to join a group. This is a fantastic opportunity to take your connections and practice deeper over that longer period of time.

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 find you a place immediately, 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 with an online group, but remember that coming together in person with other Mitras is an important aspect of doing the course, and you should join an in-person group rather than study on your own, or online, 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 are there to help you do that. 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 habit of going on retreat, maybe starting by just going on a weekend, 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 mean taking part in the life of your 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 Sangha, but if you limit your involvement 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.

There is usually an opportunity to reaffirm yourself as a Mitra at Buddhist Centres during the annual Sangha Day festival. This may take the form of once more being invited to make the three traditional offerings of flowers, candles and incense during a puja. This is optional. If you are not able to re-affirm as a Mitra for any reason at a Sangha Day festival, your place in the Mitra Community is not affected. The Order and Mitra Sangha will continue to regard you as a Mitra whether or not you are able to reaffirm yourself as a Mitra on festival days.

FAQ

I've been practising 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 six 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 practising the five precepts, but not that we are practising them perfectly. 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?

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 Triratna Community 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. In practice the declaration need not rule out attending events organised by other Buddhist groups, but it probably would rule out going on retreat with another tradition. Most Mitras find it difficult to spend enough time on retreat, and if we devote the limited time we have available for this to another tradition, this would probably indicate that we see that tradition as our main context, and not the Triratna Community. Implicit in the third declaration is an understanding that if we were to

engage with ongoing training, study, retreats or a teacher outside the Triratna tradition, we would be undermining the commitment we made at our Mitra ceremony to the Triratna community and its shared system of practice, which would be confusing both for ourselves and other Mitras around us too.

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

It would be good to 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 worldwide 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 Community. In practical terms this will 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

Online access to the Dharma Training Course for Mitras
thebuddhistcentre.com/mitra

The Buddhist Centre Online - Triratna's main website
thebuddhistcentre.com

Free Buddhist Audio - talks and texts
freebuddhistaudio.com

Windhorse Publications - Triratna's main publisher
windhorsepublications.com

Where to go on retreat (mostly in the UK)
goingonretreat.com

Future Dharma Fund - helping Triratna thrive
futuresharma.org

Triratna News - the latest news from around Triratna
thebuddhistcentre.com/news

Urgyen Sangharakshita Trust - about Sangharakshita
Sangharakshita.org

Adhithana - Triratna's 'headquarters'
adhithana.org

thebuddhistcentre.com/mitra

