

Becoming a Mitra at the Bristol Buddhist Centre

This booklet is intended for people who are beginning to feel that they may be a Buddhist or are wondering about becoming a mitra.

Introduction

What is a mitra?

A mitra is someone who feels that they are a Buddhist and wants to explore Buddhist practice predominantly within the FWBO.

“Mitra” means “friend” (in Sanskrit, an old Indian language): so a mitra is someone who has a friendly regard for the FWBO, and wants to make friends with other people in the FWBO.

To find out if you want to be a mitra, ask yourself if you are happy making the following three “declarations” (They are described more in the next section)

1. I feel that I am a Buddhist.
2. I am trying to practise the five ethical Precepts.
3. I want to deepen my practice within the context of the FWBO.

If you do, then you can choose to become a mitra. The only stipulation is that you have been attending the Centre for approximately six months.

Why become a mitra?

Becoming a mitra is intended to be a way for someone to mark a shift from being someone who is interested in Buddhism, or who likes meditating, to being someone who feels a definite affinity with the Buddhist path.

Although this is an internal process, it is very helpful to mark the process externally. Becoming a mitra is a bit like a rite of passage that can help mark the fact that you have started with a certain degree of determination on a Buddhist spiritual path.

How do I become a mitra?

If you are curious or keen to become a mitra, simply ask any Order member and they will hopefully be able to discuss it with you. If for any reason they feel they cannot do this they will refer you to the mitra convenor.

If you then want to become a mitra the mitra convenor will probably want to meet to talk with you. This is not to test you or size you up; they will simply want to make sure that you are clear about the meaning of being a mitra,

and to talk over the ceremony, and any concerns or questions that you may have.

No one is turned down, although if you have been in contact with the Centre for less than 6 months, you will probably be advised to wait a little.

When you are sure that you do want to be a mitra, make sure that you have asked the mitra convenor clearly. S/he will then arrange a ceremony at which you will become a mitra (see "About the Mitra Ceremony"). It may take a few months for the ceremony to come around, as there are only a few ceremonies held each year. The mitra convenor will liaise with you about possible dates.

FAQs

Who or what is a mitra convenor?

A mitra convenor is an Order member who is a special contact person for mitras and people who may want to become mitras. There is usually a separate mitra convenor for men and women.

They will have a particular interest in seeing that the Dharmic (understanding and practice) needs of mitras are met. They will try to encourage a sense of Sangha within the mitra sangha, by arranging events which encourage mitras to come together. They will usually be happy to talk over issues in relation to the mitra's spiritual life.

If you have ideas for events or classes that you will find beneficial, the mitra convenor is a good person to talk to; they may be able to help it come about. To find out the name of the current mitra convenor, just ask any Order member or Centre team member, or phone the Centre.

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

No, there are no fixed beliefs that you need to adhere to in order to be a Buddhist, or become a mitra. Buddhism is more like a system of practice than a set of beliefs; though it would be surprising if you felt yourself to be a Buddhist yet, for example, did not believe in the possibility of change for the better.

Do I need to wait to be invited or told I'm ready?

No. The initiative should come from you, when you feel ready.

The Three Declarations

The three declarations are to help you clarify, for yourself, if you want to become a Mitra. These are self-applied, so you simply ask yourself "do I feel these three things; do they fit my experience?"

The only stipulation is that we'd like you to have been around the centre for about six months. If you have, and if you feel happy with the declarations, then you are free to ask to become a mitra, and the mitra convenor will arrange it.

1) "I feel I am a Buddhist"

This means that you have come to feel some kind of identification with the Buddhist tradition. In traditional terms, you feel you want to "Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels" (see next chapter for clarification). In more down-to-

earth terms, maybe you could ask yourself what you'd write on an official form that asked for your religion.

The feeling of identification is different for different people. Some people might feel quite strongly that the Buddha represents their spiritual ideal. They might actually feel a connection with the person of Buddha, and want to emulate him, want to follow directly in his footsteps. For others it will mean that the teachings of the Buddha are coherent for them: the tools and teaching make sense; the five precepts make sense; the meditation practices make sense.

For some people, it is the "atmosphere" of Buddhism that they connect with. This is a more intuitive approach. Some people's intuition is very clear and strong, so that they can sense "atmosphere" very palpably and directly. Or people may respond to the imagery of Buddhism, of the Buddha figure.

People also vary in the strength of their connection with Buddhism. For some it will be quite intense or strong, while for others it will be more gradual, a sense of feeling at home in Buddhism.

2) "I am trying to practise the five ethical Precepts"

Feeling an identification with Buddhism will express itself in trying to lead an ethical life as taught by the Buddha. Here they are, in their spirit rather than the traditional formulations:

I aspire to undertake to train myself ethically by:

1. Not harming others but actively practising loving kindness.
2. Not taking, or appropriating, that which another is not willing to give, but to actively practise generosity.
3. Not acting unskillfully in sexual relations and to develop stillness and contentment.
4. Not speaking falsely but making a definite practice of honesty.
5. Not indulging in intoxicants but actively trying to be mindful.

It's important to emphasise that these are *aspirations*: we may aspire to practise the precepts, but may fall far short of what we aspire to, at least at the moment. The important thing is to feel that one is gradually training oneself by working at the ethical "pit-face" of our choosing; this will lead to a gradual refinement of our ethical sensitivity.

3) "I want to deepen my practice within the context of the FWBO"

This declaration is saying that you feel comfortable with the people in the FWBO and the approach to Buddhist practice that you have been learning. You feel that it's the appropriate context for you to progress, at least at present.

It is important to have a living context for spiritual development: we have a natural and healthy need for friends and community with a common spiritual understanding. Essentially the community of Mitras is a nexus of friendships. It is for this reason that we refer to the "Mitra Community" or "Mitra Sangha", which is a community of friends and a context for shared practice.

FAQs

I'm happy with the Buddhist ideas and practices, but I don't want to define myself as a "Buddhist". Can I still become a mitra?

Read through the section on "Going for Refuge". If you feel you are going for Refuge to the three Jewels, then go ahead - after all, the Buddha didn't call himself a "Buddhist". But if Buddhism is more of an interest than an activity for you, then maybe wait a while.

Can I eat meat / drink alcohol / take recreational drugs if I'm a mitra?

There are no hard-and-fast requirements in terms of your practice of the precepts. You decide the level at which you practice them.

Do not be surprised, though, if you gradually feel more compromised in eating meat or getting intoxicated. Most practitioners gradually (or suddenly!) find that their ethical sensitivity refines so that habits start changing. This is a sign of the practice biting; by cultivating contentment and awareness, for example, you will start to notice discomfort where some habitual behaviours run counter to these qualities.

Do I need to have a regular meditation practice to be a mitra?

No. But be aware that meditation is one of the three main aspects of a Buddhist path (along with ethics and wisdom).

What if, after becoming a mitra, I change my mind and want to stop being seen as a mitra?

No problem, just let the mitra convenor know. There's no special ceremony to "un-become" a mitra.

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

Yes, there's no limitation on what you can or cannot do. The important thing is that, when you become a mitra, you are seeing the FWBO as your main Buddhist training context for the time being. If you later align yourself primarily with another spiritual movement, you may find that you are uncomfortable in still being a mitra, in which case you can "resign", although it is not necessary.

About the mitra ceremony

You become a mitra within the context of a "mitra ceremony". This is a simple but, hopefully, significant and joyous occasion. There will usually be several people becoming a mitra at the same time.

Why have a ceremony?

You may feel that it is enough to simply decide that you are a mitra, without needing to "go public" about it. But ceremonies matter: from the dawn of civilisation rituals have been used to mark significant "rites of passage". They help to cement and intensify the shift that they are marking. In this case, the ritual is marking the fact that you feel, after some exploration, that you are a Buddhist. This is a significant internal shift, so it is helpful to have it marked externally in actions, which do speak louder than words. And it is important

for other people – especially loved ones and people you respect – to witness your aspirations.

Most people find that the ceremony has a stronger effect than they imagined, and that it provides a spur to their practice.

What will happen at the ceremony?

The ceremony usually takes place within the context of a puja – a devotional ritual. If you haven't yet experienced a puja, it's worth talking to the mitra convenor about it, and preferably sitting through one first, maybe on a Friday practice night.

At a point within the puja the recitation will stop, and someone will usually say something of the significance of being a mitra. Then the people who are becoming mitras in turn approach the shrine and make the three traditional offerings of flowers, candle and incense. (You light the candle and incense before offering them!) At this point, they become mitras. Then the puja runs through to the end. We also usually have someone introduce the new mitra to the Sangha and rejoice in their qualities.

Afterwards people sometimes offer gifts and cards to the new mitras.

FAQs

What do I need to do on the ceremony?

Your only part is to bring and make the offerings. You don't need to make any speeches.

Who will be there? Can I bring friends?

The occasion is open to the Sangha of friends, mitras and Order members. Hopefully there will be a good number of people to welcome you into the mitra Sangha. You are very welcome to invite any friends or family who you would like to witness this occasion. The leader will make sure that s/he explains the proceedings so that non-Buddhists will not be too baffled.

How do I make the offerings? Do I need to bow?

Although you may notice a pattern in the way people make offerings, there is no particular protocol to stick to. The leader of the ceremony may guide you in the order in which to make them (usually: flower, candle, incense). The important thing is that whatever you do is an expression of your respect to the three Jewels.

People generally bow on approaching the shrine and after making the offerings. It is not necessary to do so, but you may want to try it unless you would feel very uncomfortable or artificial.

People quite often kneel before the shrine to bow, and sometimes you will see people making "full prostrations", i.e. lying flat on their stomach in devotion. It is not necessary to copy any particular way of showing devotion.

What do I need to bring to the ceremony?

Bring a flower, candle, and stick of incense to offer to the shrine. There is no regulation size, colour or scent. There will be a vase and offering bowl on the shrine to place the offerings in.

What is the significance of the offerings?

When you make an offering to the shrine, it is usually an expression of your respect and receptivity towards the Buddha. It is a way of “underlining” your feeling of commitment to following his example and teaching.

The three offerings also have traditional symbolic interpretations: flowers symbolise beauty and impermanence, candles shine forth the light of wisdom, and the scent of incense spreads out like the beneficial actions of an ethical life.

“Going for Refuge” and being a Buddhist

What gives us a sense of confidence and orientation in the confusion of this life? We probably all have built up various ways: we may gain some confidence and security from our career, from our relationships, from being comfortably well-off, or in any number and combination of ways. In the Buddhist tradition, whatever we “place our weight” of confidence on in this way has become known as a “refuge”.

The three Refuges

The Buddha saw most refuges as being somewhat insecure when looked at dispassionately, because they are all prone to change: we can be made redundant, our friends may die or move away, our money may get spent. To the Buddhist, the only real sources of security are the three Jewels: the Buddha, Dharma (his teaching and path of practice) and Sangha (the Buddhist community). They are called the three Jewels because they are the three most precious things to a Buddhist. They are also called the three Refuges, because they are seen to be reliable and effectively unchangeable.

In the traditional Buddhist texts, when someone met the Buddha and was strongly moved to follow his teaching, they usually are represented as saying something like “To the Buddha for refuge I go, to the Dharma for refuge I go, to the Sangha for refuge I go”. This has become the Going for Refuge formula, which is chanted all over the world by Buddhists, usually in the Pali language (“Buddham saranam gacchami...”), and you will hear it recited in the FWBO, for example at pujas.

This language of “Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels” may be unfamiliar, but Sangharakshita — the founder of the FWBO — has emphasised that it encapsulates the heart of what it means to be a Buddhist, so it is worth trying to understand what it means.

It is easiest to understand the three Jewels in their more general form first, and then see them in their more specifically Buddhist meaning.

The Buddha – our ideals

The Buddha refuge represents more broadly the potential for growth that we all possess. By having some vision of who we could become, we can orientate ourselves in life: we can live by principles and values rather than being blown around by whims or demands made upon us. And having this sense of purposefulness in life gives it meaning.

Maybe we start to suspect that actually there’s no limit placed on how far we can grow – there’s no “glass ceiling”. And maybe we feel that the qualities

exemplified by the Buddha represent those that we want to develop – qualities of wisdom, compassion and freedom. And so we realise that there's nothing in principle stopping us from growing to the stature of the Buddha. As this starts happening, the Buddha refuge, in its broader sense of an ideal for ourselves, starts becoming the Buddha refuge in its specifically Buddhist sense.

The Dharma – our understandings and practices

To get through life, we form understandings of the way the world works, what makes other people tick, what makes us tick. And we learn how to go about getting what we want to be happy and avoid suffering. These learnings are important, and form what we may call our “Dharma refuge” in its broadest sense – they give us a measure of confidence and security in a complex world.

When we learn about Buddhism, we may find our understandings of the world becoming aligned to the way the Buddha described it. For example, we may see the uncomfortable nature of trying to hold onto things that are basically impermanent. We may also try out some of the Buddhist practices: such as trying to live more ethically, and meditating regularly. And to the extent that we find these new understandings and practices helpful in living our life, we could say to that extent our Dharma refuge becomes more specifically Buddhist.

The Sangha – our human context

We are all part of a network of relationships with other humans. The quality of those relationships has a tremendous impact on our quality of life, and the people who surround us can significantly mould our outlook on life. There is a natural desire to have some relationships that are emotionally intimate and meaningful. In its broadest sense, one could say that these significant relationships are our Sangha refuge.

If you spend time around the Buddhist Centre, you will probably find that you start making friends there. Maybe you find that you can discuss some things of value with them that you can't with your other friends; that having a shared interest in growth and Buddhism gives you something valuable in common. And maybe you will meet a few people who especially seem to embody qualities that you aspire to: they may have a particularly clear outlook on life, seem calm, or simply very friendly and open.

If you start to find that associating with other Buddhists helps you to encourage and support your process of growth, then you will probably make an effort to be around them where possible; you will value the Sangha, and so “go for Refuge to the Sangha” in its more Buddhist meaning.

Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

If we start valuing the three Jewels in this fashion, we can say that we are going for Refuge to them, and this is what makes us a Buddhist. We increasingly use the three Jewels as reference points in our life; we use them to guide us.

Sangharakshita made a helpful distinction by describing five different levels of Going for Refuge. I will mention just two here:

Provisional Going For Refuge: This is the point at which one is beginning to value the three Jewels in the way mentioned above. In doing so, we decide to make a provisional commitment to practice. We may not be convinced, or sometimes the forces of old habits may make it difficult to follow through with our intentions, but nonetheless we do what we can. This loosely corresponds to the point of becoming a mitra.

Effective Going For Refuge: After a while, we become clearer about what the three Jewels really are, and what constitutes effective Dharma practice. We gain more confidence in the efficacy of the Dharma, and in our ability to practice it consistently. We begin to feel that we are willing to base our life around the three Jewels; they become our main orientation and purpose in life, and so we commit ourselves to them. This is effective going for Refuge, and is the point at which one can become an Order member.

Your Relationship to the Centre

Becoming a mitra does mark a subtle shift in the relationship between the mitra and the Buddhist centre and sangha.

Privileges and Duties

There aren't any! Becoming a mitra is a declaration on the part of the mitra, and the Centre provides the context to have that declaration witnessed. It doesn't endow any particular privileges or duties on behalf of either the mitra or Centre. You don't need to attend certain events or pay a membership; the Centre isn't bound to provide any particular events, or a space in a study group.

However, in recognition of the new relationship, it is likely that the mitra will have a stronger feeling for wanting to help the Centre; and the mitra convenor will very likely want to help the mitra take their Dharma practice deeper, especially by providing regular study. You will probably find some events or courses that are open only to mitras.

Study opportunities

Ask the mitra convenor, or look out for leaflets or posters concerning the study opportunities on offer to mitras. Generally, we aim to provide an on-going mitra course to help mitras deepen their Dharma understanding, and deepen relationships within the Sangha.

Mitra sangha

One of the richest aspects of becoming a mitra is joining the "mitra sangha". This is potentially a field of friendship, and peer-group support. The mitra sangha is as valuable and enriching as its members make it.

Dana relationship

You have probably already experienced the dana relationship, maybe without recognising it as such. "Dana" means generosity, and it signifies the type of relationship that would ideally exist within this community of Buddhists.

Dana is the spirit of the second precept: “with open-handed generosity, I purify my body”.

It is this spirit that the Centre tries to exemplify as far as possible in its charging structure. All regular classes, study groups, and festivals are offered free of fixed charge. This is not because the Centre doesn't need any more money! The Centre certainly has constraining financial needs.

To the extent that the mitra (or friend, or Order member) wants the work of the Centre to continue and grow, it is hoped that they will want to assist the Centre to do so; this may involve giving money, and/or time, in various different ways. You may particularly want to bear in mind that the mitra convenor is supported financially to help people like you deepen their practice, and so think in terms of helping to support that person.

FAQs

I don't have much spare time: what's the best way to give to the Centre?

Making out a regular standing order to the Centre is an invaluable means of support, even if it's just to cover the cost of tea and biscuits when you come. Ask a member of the Centre team for a form.

I don't have any spare money; can I help in some other way?

There are many ways of giving your time to the Centre.

1. Come to our regular work afternoons to help with cleaning, maintenance and DIY.
2. Come in some other time that suits you to do office work, administration, reception work etc.

Contact the office to help with any of these ways or with any suggestions you may have.

Do I have to have finished the mitra study course before I become a mitra?

No, the mitra course is a course for mitras, not a course to become a mitra.

I don't have time to do mitra study – can I still become a mitra?

Yes, there is no need to undertake mitra study if you don't have the time or desire to do so.

If there is currently no mitra study available, what should I do?

Try to link up with other mitras in a similar situation and start your own group. Ask any Order member or senior mitra if they would be willing to be a mentor to your study group. (This does not mean leading it but being available to discuss how it's going).

If there is currently no mitra convenor, what should I do?

In Bristol we are trying to set up a mitra buddy system so that those mitras who have been involved for a significant amount of time can support and guide those who are newer. Ask your Centre office for a list of mitras in the buddy system and arrange to meet up with some of them.