

Introduction

The Triratna young Buddhists project started in 2008, when Lokabandhu and Vajragupta convened a group of young-ish people from centres around the UK to look at how to address the ageing demographic of the Order. There were around 30 young people at that first meeting. Fast forward to 2016 (the time of writing) and there are 25 young Buddhist groups worldwide, an international calendar of events involving hundreds of young people every year, and growing numbers of young people joining the Order. So the Young Buddhists Project has come a long way in this time, and yet in sense, there are many more possibilities still to be explored!

This handbook updates a document written in 2011 called 'Starting a Young Sangha Group'. It begins by going through the principles of setting up a young Buddhist group in your local centre, suggests ideas to try out, and finally ways to develop your group. The intention is that this will be a working document, which can be edited and added to over time by young facilitators and serve as a resource for everyone involved in running a young Buddhist group.

For more information, corrections and clarifications, contact Prajnaketu youngtriratna@gmail.com.

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A few general points before you start

Start small, simple, and fun – see it as a group of Buddhist friends hanging out together and go from there.

Do what you feel comfortable with – what are your strengths? How can you play to them? You might want to ask a friend to help in this process. If you're not comfortable being up-front teaching in a class situation, the good news is you don't have to be! There are no fixed rules about what a young Buddhists group looks like, so feel free to experiment, review and recreate as you go along.

Do what you think is needed where you are – in what ways are the needs of young people already being addressed at your centre/group? It might be that there are few young people where you are and you just need to get to know each other better; it might be that your sangha is buzzing with young people and the need is more to do specific study or work on a project together to deepen your friendships with one another.

Have a trial period of 3-6 months and then review – you don't have to commit to something indefinitely. Try it out, see what the interest is like and then decide on further commitment.

Keep local order member(s) involved in your thinking process from the start.

Friendship is the key – whatever you decide to do, if you always come back to creating conditions for friendships to grow and develop, you can't go far wrong.

Steps to launching a young Sangha group

1. Talk to other young people around your centre (i.e. mitra study/regulars classes) about doing something together. Bringing others on board means that you can pool your interests, experience, and skills – it's just a lot more enjoyable.

Ideally go on a road trip together to another nearby young Buddhist group or retreat (Big One, Sub25s, Young Men's/Women's, Young Facilitators). Check out <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/youngbuddhists/triratna-young-buddhists-groups> for a list of young Buddhist groups worldwide. These are great for getting ideas about what is possible and tuning into the atmosphere of young Buddhist gatherings.

2. Talk to an order member. Someone who knows you and the local situation is preferable. Discuss with them what you're thinking of doing and check it fits with their vision of the centre – important! But the young Buddhists co-ordinator (Prajnaketu at the time of writing) is at hand for this sort of thing too youngtriratna@gmail.com.

3. Set a time and date for your first meeting and book a space. Buddhist centres can book up a long way in advance but often Friday/Saturday/Sunday evenings (or afternoons) can be quiet times around centres and also work well as an 'alternative' option to going out drinking &c.

4. Talk to more people. You might want to start off with a small core, but sooner or later you'll probably want it to grow. So it helps to

- Go to classes at your centre and personally invite young people you meet
- Get young people's email addresses and send out email invitations
- Talk to your centre Chair, Mitra Convenors and people running intro courses to find out about other young people who might be interested

5. Nourish yourself.

- Participate actively in mitra study and do your own reading/listening to what inspires you in the Dharma
- Go on Triratna retreats
- Go on the facilitators training weekends ([link](#))
- Know your sources of inspiration and keep returning to them!
- Join the young facilitators kula group for more up-to-date info and ideas on running a group <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/youngbuddhists/young-facilitators-kula>

6. Prepare well.

- Write a plan and some notes in advance of the event and talk them through with your team and/or a local order member
- Give yourself plenty of time on the day to arrive and settle in

7. Enjoy it!

- The overwhelming response of facilitators so far is that they love running young sangha groups – relish the opportunity to give, go outside your comfort zones and be creative!
- Young people really enjoy the groups and appreciate the effort you put in.

- Most people who come along are very supportive and the sense of all chipping in together is something people remember fondly for a long time.

Ideas for what to do

All of this is given as a suggestion in the spirit of experimentation, play and adaptation. If you have other ideas which work well, let others know by adding them in.

Start here

One good place to start is a 'wraparound' meeting: like a cup of tea or a meal together with other young people before a general Sangha event. It requires almost no preparation and is a great way to get to know the other young people around and means that they don't have to commit to going to something on another night.

Keep it regular

Meeting up at a regular set time really helps: something like the first Friday evening of every month. If you're a regular feature in the life of the Buddhist centre it makes it easier to point someone new in your direction and means that the people who come more regularly just 'know' when and where it's happening.

Build a core team

Even just one or two other people can help with all the little jobs on the day or share the responsibility of hosting an event. Being part of a joint project together can also make it a lot of fun!

Basic Format

It could be something like:

5pm team check-in and prepare venue

6pm meet & greet and tea

6.30pm meditate together

7.15pm more tea (it's important to build in time when you're just socialising)

7.45pm introduce a theme or passage with some 'starter' questions and then discuss

9pm clear-up and/or hang out chatting and/or go out somewhere else

Variations

Bring food to share beforehand – this is really nice and gives everyone a sense of contributing

Leave out the meditation – if you're not confident leading it

Invite an older order member to give a talk / lead meditation / be grilled in a Q&A

Workshop Saturday afternoons in Berlin including: meditation, personal talk on the topic, some creative exercises (collages, mandalas), communication exercises, ritual.

Themes

Try to go with something that inspires you. One of the main benefits for the people coming along is seeing the 'fourth sight' – a young person who is fired up by the Dharma can be very inspiring and can really change people's lives!

Some groups follow a series of themes over a number of evenings e.g.

Noble Eightfold Path (Dublin)

Ethics, Meditation, Wisdom (various – West London, Oxford...)

Five Precepts (Sheffield)

Living with Kindness (Dublin)

Six Perfections (?)

Six distinctive emphases of Triratna (Norwich)

The Three unwholesome roots: Greed, Hatred and Delusion (Ipswich)

The wheel of life (Birmingham)

Vision, Path, Transformation

Compassion, Wisdom, Energy (Berlin)

Buddhism for Today and Tomorrow (Cambridge)

You can find good starter material for these on freebuddhistaudio.com, the Essential Sangharakshita, or the Mitra Study course.

Sheffield Younger Sangha has tended to base their evenings around a sutta from the Pali Canon: one of the team chooses a favourite sutta, presents why it inspires them and then opens it out into discussion.

Or you could go in the other direction, starting with a 'worldly' topic and bringing a Buddhist perspective to it:

Jobs/work, Money, Friendship, Environmentalism, Technology, Social media, Relationships/Sex, Porn, Gender, Academic study, Starting families, Art/music/culture, Activism, Drugs, Community, Travel, War...

Publicity

There's some excellent publicity around the young Buddhists world – from what Prajnaketu has seen it's at the cutting edge of publicity in Triratna! The best publicity gives a flavour of what your group is like to people who haven't yet been, and lessens any perceived obstacles standing in their way. Producing publicity can also be an excellent way of getting regular people involved in the running of the group.

Some general principles to bear in mind are:

Word of mouth is *the* most effective form of advertising: talking to someone personally – or even sending them a personal text – saying that you'd like them to come and why – is hard to beat.

Posters: A simple design with as few words as possible works well: '[City X] Young Buddhists, Title, Time/Location'. Boldness in text and imagery helps, as does challenging the stereotype of Buddhism as passive, peaceful, middle-aged-hippy-dippy, and a bit dull.

See the attached zip file for examples of images that have been used in Young Buddhists publicity. Appendix 1 has examples of blurbs. Also consider that the hand-made look is quite rare and can really stand out if done well (it's also suggestive of the group being up-and-coming, friendly and having opportunities to participate).

Email: keep it simple, short and with a clear next step. Some groups use Mail Chimp, which, if done well can give the impression of being an established, efficient group. You may or may not want to give this impression!

Facebook: probably the most popular form of publicity for young Buddhist groups. Check out Appendix 2 for a links to examples of what others do. You can also do fun things with Facebook advertising, like targeting your events to specific demographics – e.g. women aged 30-35 who like martial arts. Also posting **photos of past events** and recordings of talks gives newcomers a very tangible sense of what it'll be like on the night.

Be creative: e.g. make selfie videos / animations / montages / music to advertise your next event. Arguably, the more fun you've had in publicising the event, the more attractive it'll seem to others.

Nourish your team

Find ways of meeting up as a team in which you're not just planning and talking about the group – go out to the movies together, share a meal, and go on retreat for a weekend. In order to be free to connect with the people coming along to the group it really helps to have another time for your own catching-up.

Set up a culture of rejoicing in others and welcoming feedback. Running a young Sangha group is a training ground, so make the most of the opportunity to develop your own skills by gathering feedback and rejoice in the efforts that other people have made.

You could even invite an order member to come to your meeting and observe and give you feedback; or arrange a session for you to do role-playing exercises.

On the night – be a good host

Obvious enough, but welcoming people on the door, introducing them to others in the group and making the effort to learn people's names make a big difference to people feeling welcomed. The more people who have 'got' this in the group the better!

During the evening have a short announcement in which you thank everyone who contributed to making it happen – the team, speaker, whoever brought along the cakes, &c. This creates an atmosphere of appreciation, which is very attractive.

At the end of the event, say goodbye to people at the door and wish them well and/or suggest a next time when you'll meet.

Communicate effectively

Try as much as you can to communicate in person or via skype/phone calls. Emails and texts, while easier to send, and useful for making arrangements to meet, are harder to gauge people's genuine response, and can easily be misinterpreted. Building a young Buddhist group is a great opportunity to raise the level of communication between people.

Be honest with yourself and others. Talk honestly about what you are prepared to commit to and what your motivations are. Then ask others for what they think.

At events, avoid 'teaching' or talking *at* people. Often what people are looking for when they come to a young Buddhists group are friendship and connection: they can find teachers at other events your centre holds. You're main strengths will be in exemplifying what it is like to be leading a Dharma life as a young person and befriending those who come along. So it's probably best to see the young Buddhist events as a chance to explore topics and teachings together as young people, rather than teaching as such, unless your peers explicitly ask you to teach them and local order members are happy with you doing that.

Taking your young Sangha Group to the next level

After a while you may become quite comfortable with running the group and be looking for ways to develop it. Here are a few suggestions:

Run a whole day event

Day events run as a one-offs can be great once you have an established group of people coming along. If you can be sure that you can attract a crowd you can bring in guest speakers and themes quite successfully. They may take a bit more drive and publicity to get going but you may find this type of thing very fulfilling and enjoyable and a good way to deepen friendships.

Inspiring the next generation to inspire the next generation

Bring younger people onto your team – ways in for them could be inviting them to team meetings, setting up the room, making the publicity, baking cakes, making announcements on the evening, welcoming people in, giving short personal talks, inviting and hosting guest speakers, coming on young facilitators meetings... The shelf-life of a young Buddhist is short (!) so having an eye to succession is an important part of developing the group – and Triratna – for the future.

Start a sub25 group

This is one of the cutting edges of the young Buddhists project: same ideas as above, just aimed at a younger demographic. It's worth remembering that for genuinely young people (ie teenagers and students), someone at the upper end of the sub35 bracket might be nearly twice their age! And it's generally accepted that age difference is perceived as more significant the younger you are. So the benefit of a sub25 group is just to create a sense of a peer-network among the youngest people coming along.

Finally, you don't have to be under 25 to run these groups!

Uni groups

An anecdotal survey of the top 100 universities in the UK revealed that very few of them have Buddhist societies. This is potentially a great opportunity to make the Dharma accessible to people at a time when they are shaping what their lives will look like in the future. Much more can be said on this, but the main thing is often having an 'in': a student at your local university who can set up the society for you and publicise it more widely.

Unusual events

The sort of events that will put a lot of people off will also, by the same degree, inspire others. E.g.

- All-night sits or pujas: alternating walking, meditating, drinking tea, with a puja and readings from canonical texts like the Bodhicaryavatara, the Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava, and the Dhammapada.
- Wild camping weekends: go off into the wild to meditate with others.

- Cemeteries: similar principle to the above – talk to your local church/council about this first!
- Attend peaceful protests together.

BAM! (Buddhist Action Month)

This is a great way to channel the energy and idealism of young Buddhists into projects that relate to global issues. See what happened in 2016 here <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/buddhist-action-month-2016>

Go on retreat together

Get a carload of young Buddhists and visit other young Buddhist groups in your region (or further afield!); come as a 'crew' to national and international young Buddhist retreats; jointly run retreats/sleepovers at your centre with other young Buddhists in your region.

Train for Ordination

If you've asked for ordination, don't hang about! Try to get on as many Going for Refuge retreats as you can, and engage with your training in your local situation. In the short term this will boost your own levels of inspiration and give you ideas. In the long term – ie when you're ordained – it will serve as a potent inspiration to other young people that it is possible to lead a full time Dharma life and not be old!

Live together

Why not move in together with other young Buddhists? Make the spirit of young Buddhists events more and more a part of your daily life. There may also be 'elders' in your local centre who have valuable experience of living in communities and who might be interested in helping you set one up.

Work together

Raise funds for your local centre by selling homemade produce (soya chai, vegan soup, &c.) at local farmers markets or running pop-up food-surplus cafes in your centre. Volunteer together in your local community. Investigate small-scale projects that bring the younger sangha together to work for a common aim.

Host wider sangha events

Offer to run a series of sangha nights at your local centre (Stockholm), organise a festival day or weekend retreat, host a film (Oxford) or quiz-and-curry night (Ipswich).

You make it what it is

Follow the interests of people coming along to your group and let it unfold: we haven't yet seen the full extent of what young Buddhist groups can be – be a part of this unfolding process!

FAQs

Who do we make it open to - regulars/mitras/complete newcomers?

Up to you – you might want to start with a core of more committed people and then open it up to others further down the line.

What do we call ourselves? Sub 35s? Young Buddhists? Younger Sangha? Alternative Friday Night? YoBs? Something else?

Again, it's up to you. Go with something you are most happy with and if necessary you can always rebrand!

What is the age limit?

Most centres at the time of writing have an upper limit of 35 years of age. In some ways this is already quite generous! And at the same time, there is a view that people in their early thirties are often at an important juncture in their lives and benefit from peers around them.

How do we ensure that the younger sangha doesn't just become a separate group?

Try hosting events for the wider sangha – film nights, barbecues, walks, festival days; also invite people from your younger sangha group to the main events at the centre (this is probably where they will get the best teaching!)

Do I need a DBS check?

Unless you're advertising your events as to include under 18s, you should be ok without a DBS check, though it is worth speaking to someone on your centre team about this to find out the up-to-date procedure. More information can be found at <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/eca/safeguarding-children-and-vulnerable-adults-2015>

Appendix 1 – Blurbs

[Glasgow May 16]

What moves you? What fascinates you? What scares you? What pulls you in and beyond?

Come to Kelvingrove Art gallery and Museum and explore together what it is for us that engages our imagination, in image, motif and mystery, and how we can work with it in our practice. Not the average stroll around a gallery...

We'll meet at 1 on Sunday for lunch in the Kelvingrove Cafe, then set the stage and context for exploring what we see around us, then we will plunge into the treasures and horrors of the grove and discover what jumps out and pulls us into the imaginal realm. Its not about 'art', its about you...and maybe more...

We'll get together later and walk down to The 78 for falafels! (or whatever you fancy...I'm having falafels)

It'll be a blast, and a wonderful chance to find out what we're all about and catch a glance into eachothers werid and wonderful worlds.

"A feast for hungry eyes that linger for an instant, unblinking and still with momentary courage, for the gravitywell of the unknown rising like an ecstatic tide to meet their cold orbit and wrench the steady world into a new and vital realm."

[Norwich June 16]

Aged 16-35? Interested in Buddhism and meditation? All welcome. No previous experience necessary. Bring your friends. You don't need to be a Buddhist to come along, and we won't try to make you one!

Our theme for the comings months is the Mandala of the 5 Buddhas (see below for details).

Vairocana, the Illuminator

Through meditation, talks and discussion/workshops, we will explore the symbolism of Vairocana, the mysterious white Buddha at the centre of the Mandala. He transforms ignorance into wisdom. But this wisdom not just about being worldly wise, it is much more than that. Transcendental wisdom sees through our delusion and penetrates into the very nature of all things, a wisdom beyond words. Find out more on Sunday 5th Junel

Led by Saddhamani

And of course, after the meeting we'll go to the Playhouse for a social.

No charge. Donations welcome.

[Cambridge July 16]

The Young People's Night at the Cambridge Buddhist Centre is an alternative Friday night for people in their teens, 20s and 30s. These events are suitable for beginners and regulars.

Tonight we will have a special guest, our very own Ratnaghosha, Chairman of the Cambridge Buddhist Centre talking about the path of altruism, the Bodhisattva Ideal. There will also be time for connecting with each other and a cup of tea.

The evening events will be followed by a late night tea bar (until 23:00) for any night owls who want to hang out afterwards.

Appendix 2 - List of Young Buddhist Groups/pages on Facebook (please add any that are missing!)

Young Triratna Melbourne <https://www.facebook.com/groups/440767635968069/>

Younger Sangha of Sheffield Buddhist Centre:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/youngersheffieldsangha/>

Young Buddhists Glasgow <https://www.facebook.com/groups/711074365597193/>

Norwich Young Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/groups/111890675512101/>

Birmingham Young Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/groups/234088986690036/>

Ipswich Young Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1544882852409864/>

Cambridge Young Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/groups/cambridgeYB/>

London Sub35 Triratna Buddhists

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LondonSub35TriratnaBuddhists/>

Tiratna Young Buddhists Nottingham <https://www.facebook.com/groups/410026262347942/>

MBC (Manchester) Young Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/groups/YoungBuddhistsMBC/>

Colchester sub 35 group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/110832882268563/>

Young Sydney Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/youngsydneybuddhists/>

Dublin Young Buddhists <https://www.facebook.com/YoungTriratnaDublin/?fref=ts>