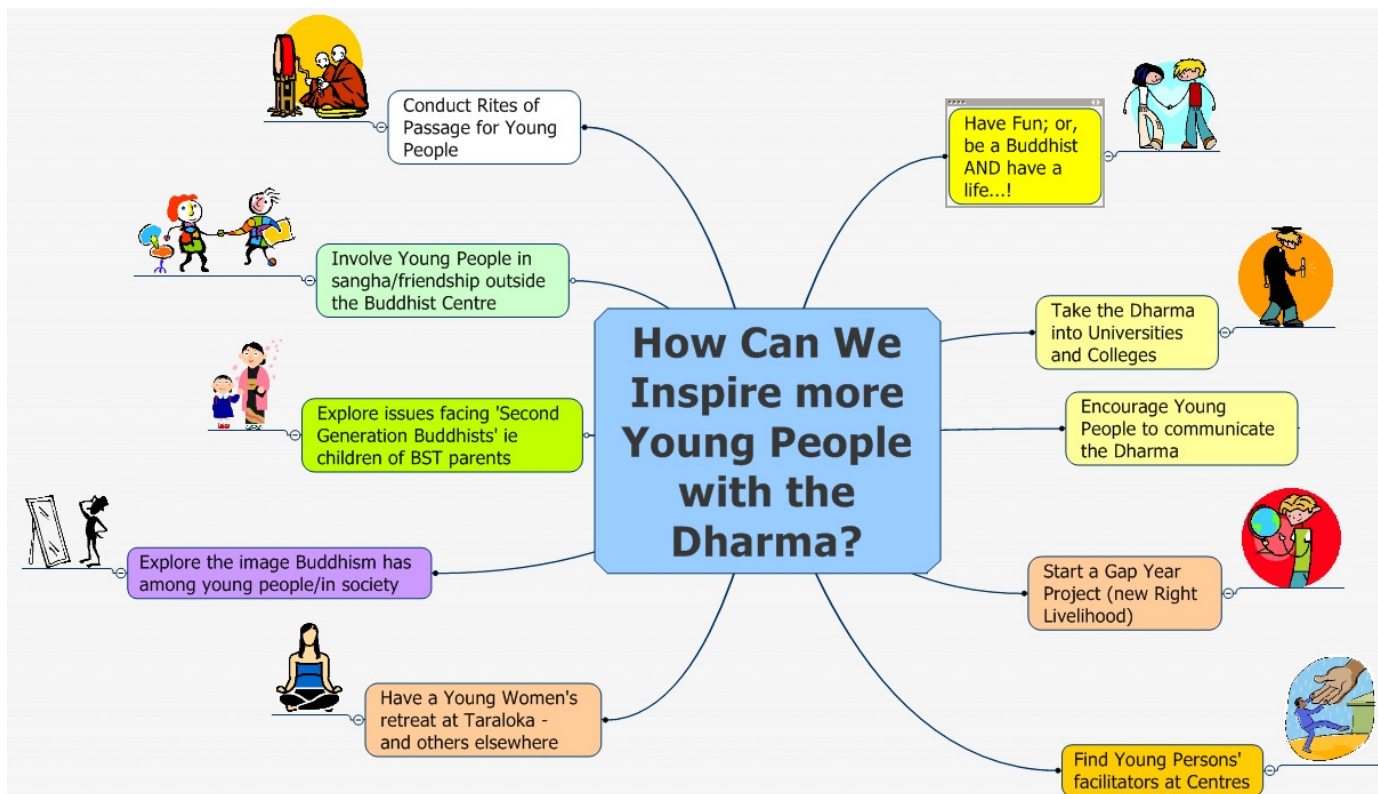


How Can We Inspire more Young People with the Dharma?

Notes from a weekend held at Bilberry Hill, November 2008



Introduction

These are the notes and suggestions from 24 people from a range of FWBO Centres in the UK and beyond who met to explore the topic "How Can We Inspire more Young People with the Dharma" over the weekend of November 7-9th 2008.

We used '[Open Space Technology](#)' to pool our ideas, concerns, and interests: this led us to explore the 9 topics summarised below. There are also four talks from the weekend posted on FreeBuddhistAudio. The weekend was led and facilitated by Lokabandhu, Munisha, Vajragupta and Vajratara, but the ideas put forwards were strictly 'bottom-up'. the notes are transcribed directly from the small groups; we may produce amore 'polished' version in time.

Your comments and suggestions would be very welcome, please contact Lokabandhu on lokabandhu@fwbo.org or 07852 281750.

Having Fun; or, how to be a Buddhist AND have a life...?



Linked topics – How do we bring more SPONTANEITY to organised activities at centres? The Importance of Fun and Joy. Are young people put off from the dharma for fear of losing their ‘life’? – ie having to choose between having a life and being a Buddhist. Ecstasy without Drugs... Freedom... Youth and Intensity. Sexual Relationships

**Young People = Radical * Alive * Joyful
Buddhism = Radical * Alive * Joyful.**

So, how can we kindle the radical, transformative energy? Not quash it with too much Red Tape. Why does it feel there’s a choice between Buddhism and life?

How can we Go for Refuge and not close off/become alienated? Playful and light-hearted, such is the Buddha-Way...

Notes by Ben (Leeds)

Are we not having fun...? Do we experience cultural solemnity? Formality? Associated with religion? How to keep the Buddhist Centre radical?

What holds us back from having fun? – memory of past mistakes? Fear of being looked down on? Of seeming childish?

Lots of physical games and exercises. A book to be published soon, by Jayaraja. Retreats exploring the above...? Playfulness...? Led by Ratnajyoti...? Musical evenings? Film nights? Social events? Sangha Walks? Sangha Samba? Fundraising events? A café in the centre? A ‘Social Secretary’ for the Centre? Meals out – and in. The Baked Potato Club – spuds b4 classes... The Centre bakes potatoes; people bring fillings, everyone eats... Fun is where the energy’s flowing.

All the above creating a social space in the centre, ensuring we remind people they are welcome any time – it’s our centre... Be sure we invite new people along to social things, avoiding cliquiness... Organising someone to keep the door open and be available to people who drop in any time. A team of people who greet newcomers – informally...

Stillness, simplicity, and contentment matter to young people too. And real friendship. And ideals. And celebration of variety. And warmth and playfulness. And role models, exemplars. And new ways of connecting with people, sharing experiences. Note: including doing things together you don’t really want to do – makes you more open to people you’re not interested in. Taking chances with one another... Play Is Where You Learn. Natural = Naturally Ethical. A Taste of Freedom.

And they'll naturally react against the drudgery of 9-5. Against the meaninglessness of consumer culture. Against stuffiness. Against being too middle-class, too wishy-washy, too new-age-health-conscious.

Time. People are too busy. Keep time open... Allow for spontaneity. 'Spending time' with people.

Exploring Bhante's 'Tantric' rendering of the Five Precepts, especially in relation to playfulness.

✚ **Taking the Dharma into Universities and Colleges**

✚ **and - Encouraging Young People to communicate the Dharma**



Notes by Sue O'Mahony

Two areas – Chaplaincies; Buddhist Societies

Questions: are 'young people' allowed to teach? In FWBO Centres? Outside them? Can mitras lead pujas? Can they if Order Members are present?

Suggestions: have flexible principles not rigid rules. Centres should provide opportunities for them to teach. Something is better than nothing! Train people to teach, including young people – in fact, see this as part of someone's training for ordination: can look at someone's motivation to teach; it highlights wrong views, gives confidence... .

See ourselves as guides and friends not teachers; avoid the words 'teach, teacher' etc. point newcomers to the Buddhist Centre. Develop guidelines for mitras (and OMs) teaching

Create informal 'Explore the Dharma' sessions – over people's lunch/tea.

Dharma Lunches. Flexible – go with what's alive in the group...

Chaplains – should they be young? Or young-at-heart?

✚ **Gap Year Project (new Right Livelihood)**



Linked topics – travel/pilgrimage for young people. Other new Right Livelihoods that meet young people's needs (paying off student loans/saving for travel/ saving for future family etc)

Notes by Jo Burbidge (Worcester)

Suggestions: make contact and link up with Karuna/TBMSG.

Research what's already been established.

Explore creating a new Right Livelihood providing Gap Year (and Career Break) opportunities for people.

Issues: do we need to choose between 'right livelihood' and paying a decent salary that'd include allowance for student loans/pension, etc.? The project could be not-for-profit either way.

Young Persons' facilitators at Centres



Linked topics – young peoples' Kulas at Centres. FWBO-wide young persons' network Would these be useful? How do we make them happen?

There are Mitra Convenors, so why not Young Peoples' Convenors? Or a 'youth-worker-in-residence'? If not, maybe centre workers' workloads could be altered to include some youth work.

Notes – suggested to present idea of young people's facilitators/kulas for the Chairs to consider. These could be formal or informal depending on local centre size/situation. The facilitator could be a young person, or not.

The facilitator would act as a reference point for new young people coming to the centre. If they were young, they'd have a link to a local Order Member. They'd support new young people in their pre-mitra stage.

UK facilitators could be linked up into a network of young people's facilitators.

The Kula would – enable friendships to develop between young people at the centre. Also peer support and social networks. – be a forum to discuss young people's issues and lifestyle choices. – allow informal activities to emerge out of young people's interests.

Suggested not to build in an exclusive age limit so long as it meets the needs of the young people themselves. Suggested it doesn't meet at the same time as formal Buddhist activities eg Sangha night, so that people can do both.

The national network could be a group on Facebook. It would - create a social network – be a forum for on-line discussions – advertise activities eg UK-wide retreats.

Young People's retreats



**Linked topics – mixed or not? Where? When? Age limits/
Young women's retreat at Taraloka**
notes by Vajratara

We identified three needs for young people's retreat (possibly overlapping):

1. introductory retreats
2. regular retreats where people can explore what it means to explore Buddhism at a young age
3. regular retreats for people who want intensive retreats – lots of puja and meditation

Suggestions for three retreats in 2010:

1. Mixed weekend for young people (introductory and regulars) at Rivendell
2. Weekend for young women at Taraloka
3. Weekend for young people followed by an intensive retreat for young people – at Dhanakosa?

Age limit: 16-39?

Dana Basis.

A team of OMs and mitras, handpicked. Of any age.

Exploring the image Buddhism has among young people/in society



What image of Buddhism do we promote?

What image of Buddhism is promoted by the culture we're in? Is it attractive?

Noted that the image Buddhist has is not entirely of Buddhism's own making. It used to be "mind-expansion", now, more "calm-stress-free-relaxation". With a little "non-violent protest" as well, plus some Tibetan exoticism.

How do WE talk about meditation? calm-stress-free-relaxation etc, or not? Is that attractive to young people?

We need to be CONFIDENT if we're to change its image. What image might be attractive to young people?

- other young people! In photos and in life.
- obvious opportunities to really contribute
- awareness they will be listened to and taken seriously
- a sense of the radical/interesting/exotic...
- themes that emerge from young people's interests and concerns

- good team chemistry and friendships
- Order Members teaching but then staying out of the way until asked...

Note – no point trying to be trendy: the latest thing's the first to go out of fashion...

But – how can one Centre attract many types of people?

Question – do young people respond to structure and goals, or anarchy...?

Questions – do our centres attract young people and fail to keep them; or never attract them in the first place...?

✚ Exploring issues facing 'Second Generation Buddhists'



Do we try to communicate the Dharma to our won children/teenagers? Could we offer more?

Notes by Jnanacandra

This was a very small group (2-3 people). Jnanacandra's experience: small size of this group might be symptomatic – whenever this theme is raised, faces tend to go blank.

There seems to be a strong fear of influencing our children unduly, "laying our trip on them. We are very aware that "we can't make our children buddhist", but does that mean that we shouldn't even try to communicate the Dharma to them?

Is it possible that Bhante's teaching of levels of GFR has been slightly misunderstood – has "ethnic buddhism" come to be seen as something bad rather than insufficient?

In the West emphasis on the individual and dharma practice as individual path, rather than community (different in India).

Bhante in his talk "15 points for Buddhist parents", says – "Don't be afraid to teach your children Buddhism."

In our centres we sometimes have activities for children & family retreats, but very little or nothing for teenagers. Teenagers drop out at some point.

Matt's experience: grew up as son of a Buddhist – his father passed on moral and aesthetical values to his children. He answered questions from dharmic points of view. But Matt doesn't feel he has been "brought up as a Buddhist". He is very grateful to his father for this. He doesn't know whether he would have developed genuine interest in Dharma otherwise.

Shambala community (mainly in USA & Canada) has been developing all sorts of activities for children and teenagers (dharma school, rites of passage, youth

camps). They do now have young adults who do practice the Dharma in second generation. Trungpa was always very supportive of family lifestyle. One Shambhala author describes her experience of instituting 10 minutes of mandatory morning meditation for the whole family with 5 children for many years. Initial resistance from children but they came to like it and great effect on family harmony (Kerry Maclean: the family meditation book). One of her daughters now running Buddhist youth programme herself. See eg www.youth.shambhala.info/index.php?id=1300 Unsure what we think of this.

Matt's experience: a distinct lack of mentoring when he was 16 / 17. Someone maybe 10 years older would have been great. How can one offer mentoring? Can't appoint a mentor, needs to develop.

Dreaming: It would be great to have youth groups for teenagers at Buddhist centres, led/ mentored by young adults only a few years older than them who have some Dharma practice. Suggestion: perhaps start with existing youth groups / youth clubs where we could perhaps contribute something.

Dharmic impulses for teenagers can't come from their parents. Parents are not on at that age. Centres need to offer something. Still, all these things will necessarily be pioneered / initiated by parents themselves. Will need a long breath!

Involving Young People in Sangha/friendship beyond the Buddhist Centre



Linked topics – what happens to the young people who do come to drop-ins/level 1/ yoga, etc...? Why don't they get more involved? What was different when more young people were getting involved? (Speculation: more younger OMs/ personal contact...) Also, what's different in the places they ARE still getting involved? How can a young person carry the Dharma with them into everyday life and still relate to their non-Buddhist peer group?

Notes and suggestions by Nagesvara and Rachael

- ❖ If there's a community you can step into it. if not, can you create one?
- ❖ Need to meet and respond to people entering the doors of the Buddhist Centre; take an interest in the interests of people coming along. Take everyone seriously.
- ❖ Informal activities needed to connect to younger people. The importance of personal invitations – invite people coming along to the centre to participate in activities you plan to do with your friends. The need for unstructured time in our lives. Need for people just 'hanging out' in centres – make it a natural meeting-place.
- ❖ Dana Economy – Centre needs a clear policy stating "its more important that people come than money"!

- ❖ Events: A Young people's retreat? Singing classes followed by going for a meal together?
- ❖ Look at the put-offs: too many Rules? Single-sex communities? A feeling everyone is 'squeaky-clean' eg regarding intoxicants?
- ❖ What's changed? In the past, housing was cheaper. Squatting. Made it easier to follow the FWBO's aim of creating a new community.
- ❖ Do we have a culture of people being encouraged to take initiative and start new things? What would help that...? – confidence, support, advice, information...

✚ Rites of Passage for Young People



From Jnanacandra - FWBO News 2007:

"This year at the [Essen Buddhist Centre](#) in Germany four teenagers celebrated their ritual of leaving childhood. About 80 people attended the ceremony, which was probably the first time ever such a rite of passage for teenagers was held at an fwbo centre...

The first part of the ceremony, '**connectedness**', was dedicated to looking back....

The second part of the ceremony, '**letting go**', focussed on the process of letting go of the child by her parents...

The third and final part of the ceremony, '**evoking strength**' evoked the strength that the girls will need in order to venture into the turbulent years ahead of them. Holding a "power object" that they had previously chosen and 'charged', each of them listened to a beautiful Rejoicing in Merit by their elder sister, parent or grandparent. In this they were reminded of the many beautiful qualities that they have and that will help them through the bardo of adolescence that will take them to adulthood.

See www.fwbo-news.org/2007/10/rite-of-passage-for-teenagers-at-essen.html for the full story...

Other ideas put forwards that weren't discussed

Accessible publicity: don't make it too FLASH

Can older Order Members recognise effective GFR in younger people?

Maintain awareness that people are individuals and can't easily be connected with when treated as 'general' entities

CREATIVE PUJAS!

FWBO on Facebook (it exists – check it out!)

Manchester hopes to use grants related to their work with schools to fund a Young Peoples Officer to run a Schools Service and 'Young Sangha' activities. Munisha has the details... Bristol too...

FOLLOW UP TO THE WEEKEND?

Surely the transcendence of the self/other boundary too young could lead to a loss of identity/confidence etc? isn't the development of a 'self' an important stage to go through?

Anyone interested in Dreamwork; or Play, is invited to contact Ratnajyoti