

Guide to Running a Local Urban Retreat August 2016



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Triratna Urban Retreats – local or international?

For a number of years, many of our Triratna Sanghas around the world have been taking part in biannual International Urban Retreats; the last one took place in November 2015. One of the most enjoyable aspects of these events has been to get a sense of our world-wide Triratna Community. It is inspiring and encouraging to experience collective practicing with members of our wider sangha who may be living in Australia & New Zealand, in Europe or the USA.

For some of us though these events have provided a bit of tension: on the one hand we are encouraging our participants to make their daily life as retreat-like as possible, and ask them to take steps to simplify how they live: for many this may include minimizing screen time! But then at the same time, if we wish those taking part to get a sense of our Triratna Community world-wide, we need to online and follow the International Urban Retreat on the buddhistcentre online, where there are talks, guided meditation and



The foundations of the spiritual community:

To have a spiritual community there must be in the first place a number of individuals.

In addition to this there must be a common spiritual framework; and this framework consists of two parts – in the first place, all members of the spiritual community have a common spiritual ideal. And secondly, they share a common means of realizing the ideal – there are following a common path or practice; they're walking the same way in the same way.

The members of the spiritual community don't have to live together under the same roof, but they do have to be in regular contact with one another – not just social contact, but real spiritual communication and exchange.

The vast majority of people undoubtedly develop best in the company of other people.

(summarized from – Sangharakshita, Lecture 89: [The Individual and the Spiritual Community](#))

contributions from people practicing all over the world.

Over 2016 – 17 the suggestion is that as many of our Buddhist Centres and Groups experiment with running a local Urban Retreat. At the Summer 2017 ECA meeting we'll review the success of the local urban retreats versus the international events in order to come to a decision whether we'll run an International Urban Retreat in 2018 or not.

Many Triratna Centres of course may have already run a local urban retreat or even do one on an annual basis with great success, as for example the London Buddhist Centre. Local urban retreats offer some advantages over the international events – the focus can more

firmly be on deepening people's personal practice and embedding it in daily life and creating more retreat-like conditions in one's normal home and work life. Practicing as part of a local sangha can also be very effective in strengthening the bonds of friendship within our group.

This Guide outlines the essential ingredients for a successful local Urban Retreat and includes some useful handouts and templates to make planning as straightforward as possible.

*Mokshini August 2016,
for the European Development Team*





How to run a local Urban Retreat:

Be clear about your vision for the event the aim of an Urban Retreat is to

- 1) To encourage sangha and friendship through being “on retreat” together, taking part in collective practice and supporting each other in their practice. Urban Retreats work in any size Sangha - from the largest Buddhist Centre to the smallest Tiratna Group.
- 2) To create conditions for deeper and more intensive Dharma practice, and helping people be able to sustain that practice into the future.
- 3) In particular, to help people bring the Dharma into their day today lives, and relating it to their everyday experience.

Then, choose a theme

The last two themes for the international urban retreats have been metta (‘Blazing like the Sun’) and aesthetic appreciation (‘Living in the Greater Mandala’).

Choose a theme that you feel would meet a current need for your sangha – for example, suitable themes may be -

- a week of Mindfulness (perhaps using themes from Maitreyabandhu’s ‘Life with Full Attention’; or from Sangharakshita’s ‘Living with Awareness’);
- Building the Buddha Land (using the four sangaravastus from the Vimalakirti Nidesa),
- The Four Immeasurables,
- The Four Reminders,
- The Five Spiritual Faculties,
- The Six Paramitas,
- Faith and Devotion
- you get the idea!

The basic components of an Urban Retreat:

The basic format is a week-long period of more intensive practice, supported by two day retreats at your Centre or Group, and the provision of some support in-between. However, within our Triratna Buddhist Community we have very different Triratna practice situations, and a large Centre will have be able to use different facilities and possibly have more resources on hand than a small Group can offer, so do adapt all the suggestions below to fit with your situations and capacity – decide what will work best for you!

There are **a few essential ingredients** to make an Urban Retreat enjoyable and successful:

1. A beginning:

Start with a day retreat: on this day retreat you will communicate the theme, allow time for people to reflect and write down their practice aims for the week, and importantly choose a dharma buddy for the week. The day retreat ends with ritually dedicating your efforts and aspirations.

2. Support during the week:

your sangha members will have some support already through their written practice commitments, and through their contact with their dharma buddy. You may be able to offer them additional input: this can range from daily inspirational texts, to posting online short daily talks and study material, to additional classes for that week like morning/evening meditations.

3. Ritual at the end:

find a way to dedicate the efforts and practice undertaken during this week: ideally with a second day or half day retreat, but for smaller situations you might need to find another time – for example using the Sangha night after the week to report out, clarify how people wish to take what they've learnt forward, and finish with a puja.

More info on these three steps below!





The Urban Retreat in more detail

The first day retreat

A whole day works best for this, as you will have time to start with a meditation and have lunch together. But if your situations does not allow it, you can start your Urban Retreat with a morning or an afternoon session.

Make sure you include the three main ingredients of the first event:

- 1) **Introduce the theme** of the Retreat and offer some ideas for how this can be relevant to our lives. You can talk about this yourself, or you may want to share a talk – or part of a talk - given on the theme that is on freebuddhistaudio, and then follow with some personal thoughts and reflections.
- 2) **Provide a space in which people can reflect** on their lives, choose what they want to cultivate and practice over the week, and think about what would help

them get there and what hinders them from getting there.

It is important that they are encouraged to make their own practice commitments that they are likely to follow through. If they take up someone else's suggestions that don't fit into their everyday life, they may end up feeling disheartened if they are unable to do them.

A large part of the first day event may be spent reflecting and/or talking through with a partner thinking through what they could do as part of the retreat, and writing it down in some way.

3) **Set up a supportive structure:**

There are different ways you can do that. The most important – in fact I'd say the crucial – way to do this is that participants choose a **"Dharma buddy"** for the week.

This is someone who is also doing the urban retreat who they undertake to be in **daily** contact with over the course of the week. This contact may be by text, by email, skype or phone, or actually meeting up in person; the main thing is they undertake to check in daily, at an agreed time, with the other person and share how it is going.

Are they doing what they set out to do? If yes, what effect is it having on their life and their mental states? If no, why not – and what might help to allow them to do it? Or is it the case that the aims were unrealistic from the start and they need to modify them to allow them to practice effectively?

Other ways that may support people's commitment is to offer them time to fill out the handout with the framework of **"resolve – remember – review"**"; see the appendix.

In any case, even if you don't want to use this particular format, encourage your sangha members to write a **practice diary** over the course of this week to help make more conscious what actually happens – what helps, what hinders?

Also remember that it helps people follow through their practice commitments if they feel they are doing it as **part of a group** which offers encouragement and support. Emphasize during the initial event that you are all doing the retreat together and that you are supporting each other.

A ritual context (for example the dedication ceremony and a puja) and mantra chanting also helps to develop and strengthen our aspiration. This element of ritual and devotion has proved to be a much-appreciated element of Urban Retreats in the past.

During the week:

In-between the initial and closing event of the urban retreat people will be undertaking the practices they've committed to on the first day, filling in a practice diary, and being in contact with their Dharma buddy.

Here are some **suggestions for additional support** you may want to provide:

- 1) Run/arrange additional collective practice events: open the Centre for an early morning meditation or ask a sangha member to invite others to join them for the morning meditation. Run an additional practice night that week.
- 2) Suspend the theme of your sangha night and use it and other classes (e.g. mitra study) that week to continue exploring the theme of the Urban Retreat.
- 3) Ask participants to contact you on your mobile and set up an Urban Retreat Group on your phone: send them a daily text – with a question to reflect on or a short quote from a dharma text.
- 4) Post short daily talks or written material on our website, or provide links to talks on fba on the theme
- 5) Agree on a mantra you will all chant during the course of that week



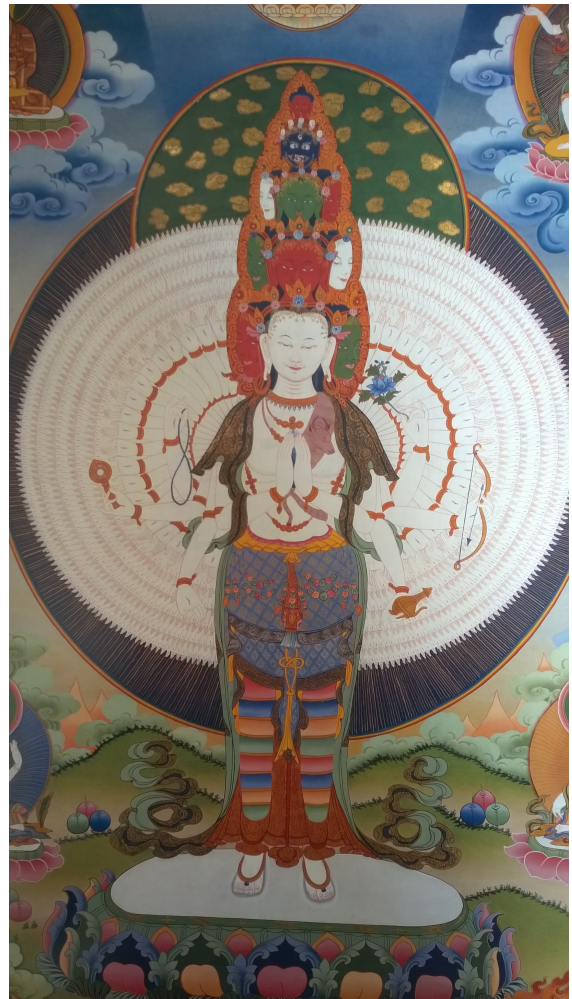
The ending:

It's important that you can provide some time for participants to come together and bring the urban retreat formally to an end.

Ideally you can end with another day retreat. If that is too much time commitment for your sangha, a morning or an afternoon slot can also be sufficient. And if that too feels too much and you are pretty sure your sangha cannot attend two consecutive weekend events (for example if your sangha members live a long way from your Centre or Group) use your regulars night to provide some opportunity for closure.

You want to allow people to

- 1) share their experience of the week with others
- 2) reflect on what they've learnt about setting up good conditions and bringing their practice into their everyday life
- 3) decide how we can best carry some of this into the future.
- 4) Dedicate your collective efforts with a ritual – a puja or at least a Transference of Merits and a mantra.



Over the next pages, there are some

Handouts and Resources for the Urban Retreat

that you may wish to use

URBAN RETREAT

Dedication Ceremony

We dedicate this place to the Three Jewels:
To the Buddha, the Ideal of Enlightenment to which we aspire;
To the Dharma, the Path of the Teaching which we follow;
To the Sangha, the spiritual fellowship with one another which we enjoy.

Here may no idle word be spoken;
Here may no unquiet thought disturb our minds.

To the observance of the Five Precepts
We dedicate this place;
To the practice of meditation
We dedicate this place;
To the development of wisdom
We dedicate this place;
To the attainment of Enlightenment
We dedicate this place.

Though in the world outside there is strife
Here may there be peace;
Though in the world outside there is hate
Here may there be love;
Though in the world outside there is grief
Here may there be joy.

Not by the chanting of the sacred Scriptures,
Not by the sprinkling of holy water,
But by own efforts towards Enlightenment
We dedicate this place.

Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,
May the lotus petals of purity open;
Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,
May the vajra-wall of determination extend;
Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,
May the flames that transmute Samsara into Nirvana arise.

Here seated, here practising,
May our mind become Buddha,
May our thought become Dharma,
May our communication with one another be Sangha.

For the happiness of all beings,
For the benefit of all beings,
With body, speech, and mind,
We dedicate this place.

URBAN RETREAT

Resolve – Remind – Review

We don't want the Urban Retreat to be another thing like New Year Resolutions, where our enthusiasm is short lived, and we forget to carry out our intentions. We have to find a way to actually bring those intentions into our lives.

"Resolve – Remind – Review" is a simple little tool for helping you to keep your practice on course day-to-day, in the midst of a busy life. It is about creating the conditions that support practice.

1) Resolve

First of all, make a clear resolve. What are you going to try and practice this week? In other words, based on your reflections this morning, form some precepts – some principles and guidelines for training. Make them as specific and particular as possible, not just general, vague statements of your good intention.

You don't have to gain Enlightenment in one week! In other words, be realistic – just one or two precepts that you'll actively engage with is better than ten big precepts that are likely to remain on the level of aspiration. Or rather, have the big aspiration, but also chunk that down into a few more practical propositions.

The suggestion is to make resolutions in three areas:

- i) Deciding what you'd like to do in your **meditation practice** each day (e.g. choosing a particular practice, doing an extra meditation, looking out for a particular habit).
- ii) Then any resolutions that help you embed the theme of the retreat **in your daily life**.
- iii) Then it might also help you to think: **what might get in my way** as I try to practice these resolutions? What can do to prevent that happening? (For example, you have a tendency to get distracted by emails or Facebook in the morning, when you could be meditating, so you resolve not to switch on your phone until after breakfast.)

b) Remind

Then we need reminders and supports for when we're in the midst of busyness that might otherwise distract us from our deeper purpose.

i) Slogans

Form your resolutions into really pithy (even a bit lighthearted and humorous – see it as play, not just work!) slogans. Pin them up on your desk, or use those magnetic letters on your fridge to spell them out, or make them your computer screensaver for the week.

ii) Rituals

Create rituals and routines that also help remind and support your intention. Here are some possible ideas:

- * Maybe have two-minute mindfulness breaks in your day to "step-back" and create more awareness.
- * Or chant a mantra when walking to work, or every time you make a cup of tea, as a way of reconnecting.
- * At home, you could do the Dedication Ceremony each morning, and/or have readings and reflections that relate to your resolutions, and/or create a special shrine.

iii) Dharma-buddies

You will already have asked a friend to "buddy-up" with you for the week, so you can talk to each other about your resolutions and progress in practicing with them. Make sure you've made a date with them, don't just leave it to one of you to contact the other, as you know what will happen otherwise! Meet for coffee, or chat on the phone or, at the very least, text each other. Meeting and talking will also act as a reminder and a support.

c) Review

Lastly, we need to review. Each day ask yourself how it is going. Are my precepts proving helpful? Do I need to refine the precepts – perhaps making them a bit more specific, or adjusting the precept to take into account what I've learnt so far? Do I need to be a bit more realistic, or could I be more ambitious? Am I staying inspired? Am I creating enough supportive conditions? It is all about learning as you go: if we don't always do what we intended the point is not to beat ourselves up, but to see what you can learn for the future.

The Urban Retreat Diary

Today's date: _____

Resolve

Review

i) Meditation

What meditation practice will I do?	When, and for how long?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of doing it or not doing it?

ii) Other resolutions

What other "practices" that will help me ?	When, and for how long?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of doing it or not doing it?

iii) Obstacles to overcome

Is there anything I need to give up, or prevent getting in the way of my resolutions?	Did I manage to give it up?	What were the effects of doing so, or not doing so?

Remind

Review

i) Slogans and reminders

Can I form a slogan for the day and put it somewhere that I'll see it?	Did I do it?	Did I contact my motivation during the day?

ii) Rituals and routines

Shall I do any rituals and "routines" to act as reminders?	Did I do it?	What was the effect of the reminders?

iii) Contact with my "Dharma-buddy"

How and when are we going to contact each other?	Did we manage to do that?	Notes

SAMPLE PROGRAMME FOR THE INITIAL DAY RETREAT

Checklist of hand-outs and “equipment” you need for the first day retreat:

- Shrine – could you get someone in your sangha to do a special shrine?
- Someone to give a talk on the theme of your Urban Retreat
- A copy of the “resolve – remind - review” hand-out to give to everyone – see page
- A copies of the Urban Retreat diary for everyone – see page ,and ask people to copy format for subsequent days
- A copy of the Dedication Ceremony to give out to everyone – see page .

9.30	Arrive for 10am start
10.00	<p>Introductions:</p> <p>This could be either going round and everyone says their name and maybe something short to introduce themselves, or perhaps – especially in larger groups – people introduce themselves to the person next to them, and then you go more quickly round in the whole group.</p> <p>Short introduction to the urban retreat:</p> <p>Give a short and basic introduction to the aims of the Urban Retreat:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * We're going to try and create the supportive conditions together to practice more intensively for a week, so we can learn to be in more positive states in the midst of everyday life, and gain more confidence in our practice and ability to change. * We'll do this through reflecting on our practice, coming up with realistic aims for the week, having ways of remembering our intentions and aspirations, using a “practice diary”, and buddying-up with someone. We'll all be on retreat together, supporting each other. * Many Triratna centres have run Urban retreats over the years, both local ones and internationally; so we can feel part of something bigger.
10.30	<p>Talk on the theme of your retreat</p> <p>Either give a talk yourself, or find a talk (or part of a talk) online of freebuddhistaudio and share some of your reflections how this theme relates to your daily life</p>
11.30	Tea break
12.00	<p>Discussion groups</p> <p>Depending on how many participants you've got, you can stay in one group, or split into small groups. For example, you might start by staying in one group and asking if there are any questions about the talk and have a bit of a Q&A. Then you might ask people to go into groups of 3 or 4, so that everyone gets a chance to talk about their impressions of the talk, explore the theme, and how this might be relevant to them.</p> <p>How could they live more with that quality for more of their lives? How stay more in contact with the Dharma throughout their day?</p> <p>You might want to come up with some more specific questions for people to reflect on in small groups, questions that relate to the talk people have just listened to. If you do split into smaller groups, it may be best to end with time in one big group to see if there are questions and issues that need responding to.</p>
13.00	lunch

14.00	<p>Buddying-up</p> <p>Ask people to pair up with someone who they'd like to "buddy up" with for the week – offering support to each other. This might be a friend – on the other hand you may make it easier to ask people to choose someone in the Sangha they don't really know very well!</p> <p>Ask them to tell each other a bit about what they've been reflecting on and also to agree with each other how much they'd like to keep in contact during the week. It is up to them what they decide: they might want to have a phone conversation or e-mail contact, or they might want to meet up. You might want to give a bit of thought to how this works e.g. are there any people on the Urban Retreat who are new and don't know anyone?</p>
14.30	<p>Reflecting on and writing down our practice commitments for the week</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Introduce people to the idea of keeping an Urban Retreat diary, and why it is important. The idea is to concretise their reflections and to write down all they intend to do during the coming week. The point is to help them to implement their intentions, not for it to become a burden! So they can make different practice commitments on different days of the week, appropriate to what's happening that day. 2) In addition, encourage them to reflect on what they did at the end of each day in order to see what lessons they can learn for the future, and to give them a more focused discussion on the last day retreat. 3) Point out that is OK to change the practice commitments during the week – for example if they find out after the first couple of days that they have taken on too much! We are doing the retreat in order to learn about how to bring our practice into our lives in a realistic way, and part of that learning process is to be flexible. What we don't want is everyone to feel guilty and a failure because they had expectations that they couldn't fulfil. 4) Also introduce people to "resolve-remind-review" – as a helpful, practical, toolbox for keeping your practice on course day-to-day, in the midst of a busy life. It is about creating the conditions that support practice. Give out copies of the handout that explains it (page 6).
15.30	<p>Tea break</p>
16.00	<p>Ritual and Aspiration</p> <p>This has often proved to be the most effective aspect of Urban Retreats (sometimes to the surprise of those taking part!) We need to put ourselves in the context of our higher inspiration, our attitude of wonder and openness to enable us to see past our limited way of being and to connect us with the mystery of what we can become.</p> <p>You might like to start with a period of a retreat metta bhavana, ending with opening up to all beings. Then dedicate the Urban Retreat with the Dedication Ceremony, and give everyone their own copy to use at home (see page 8). The Dedication Ceremony reminds us of our motivation as well as connecting us to others on retreat. End with a mantra and offerings. Mantra and ritual can connect us with who we want to become, and it is a way to open out to the fact that we need help.</p>

SAMPLE PROGRAMME FINAL DAY RETREAT OR EVENT**Checklist of hand-outs and “equipment” you need for the second day retreat:**

- * Shrine – could you get someone in your sangha to do a special shrine?
- * Coloured card for writing down resolutions and precepts – cut into lotus or hand forms or any other appropriate shapes

10.00	Metta meditation You might like to start by chanting a mantra and then have a metta practice, perhaps ringing bells for the stages of the Metta Bhavana and also having a space to include each other in it.
10.30	Reporting in Depending on how many people there are, try to report-in in a single group, so that people hear from everyone. It can be useful to give questions as guidelines such as: <i>1) Did you manage to keep your resolutions? If not, then what hindered you?</i> <i>2) What were the effects of doing the resolutions you managed to keep?</i> <i>3) What were the effects of "resolve remind – review", including the different elements of "remind" (i.e. slogans, rituals and routines, and buddying-up)?</i> <i>4) Did you notice how your mental states changed during the week?</i> <i>5) What did you learn?</i>
11.30	Tea break
12.00	Making precepts At this point people split into smaller groups, ideally with the Dharma buddy they had during the week, and talk about anything they might like to keep up after the retreat. It is a good idea to write them down in the form of precepts. Encourage people to write them down on something that they can keep on their shrine, perhaps using "mandalas" made of nice card. (The danger is that if they just write it on a piece of paper they will lose it and forget all about it quite quickly!) Once everyone has written their precepts down we report back to the whole group about what they are. For example, a group of people might agree to take on a precept for, say, 3 weeks to see if it is feasible, and meet up as a group at one of the classes (Sangha night being the most obvious) to see whether they want to carry it on after that.
13.00	Final Ritual The principle is to end with a ritual that brings everyone together and connects with the overall vision of bringing spiritual practice into everyday life in order to realise your human potential. You may wish to include a short metta practice, bringing to mind everyone practicing in your sangha and then expanding outwards. Chant a mantra and invite people to offer to the shrine the precept they have formulated and written on their card. End with reciting the rejoicing in merit and transference of merit and self-surrender sections from the Sevenfold Puja – rejoicing in what you've done and dedicating to the Awakening of all!

Space for notes:

For questions or comments regarding running an Urban Retreat contact

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