



# Starting a Young Triratna Sangha Group:

~ a guide to ~  
getting it off the ground  
~ and ~  
making it fun and fulfilling

## **ABOUT THE GUIDE**

This guide to starting a Young Sangha Group came out of a meeting between current coordinators of Young Sangha Groups around the UK, in April 2011. We felt that we would like to support people starting these groups by identifying the aspects we think help make it a positive experience and avoid some traps we have fallen into already. We came up with a (kind of) step by step guide to starting a group, which you can follow to the letter or can experiment with according to your situation.

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## CONTACTS

The people who are involved in this around the UK are listed below. They have put lots of hard work and effort with their respective centres and would love to lend their support to you too. Feel free to contact any of us for any further information.

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## **JUST TO SAY...**

You probably have in your mind an activity or event that you want to run already. Maybe you even have some people willing to help you to get the project off the ground. This is good progress. Some might say this is half the battle, this guide is not here to stand in the way of your enthusiasm and creativity. However, we came up with two important factors to consider before you take the plunge and start a young Sangha group:

1. Do what you feel comfortable with.
2. Do what you think is needed where you are.

Saying this though, we do suggest a trial period, or provisional commitment in the beginning. The idea of taking this group on for the next 5-10 years may be hindering you to start a project or you may be inadvertently putting others off who have other commitments to consider as well. We have experienced the dynamic of the vision hindering the practicality. You will have a good experience with even the smallest of projects without increasing the pressure on you to have it all sorted before it is humanly possible. A trial period tends to be of benefit over a more manageable period like 3-6 months with a view to continuing if you have the time, support and interest.

Another good thing to check before you start is: Are you ok to go it alone with this project? You would not be the first person to start something within the Triratna Buddhist Community to find the early going tough. The early stages of starting a project are uncertain and it may be more manageable when you have at least one other person committed to the cause.

Use the guide as a guide. This is a suggested route towards what you are trying to do and it hopefully it will supplement your own knowledge, enthusiasm and practice.

## STEPS TO LAUNCHING A YOUNG SANGHA GROUP

1. Talk to an Order Member
  - Someone that knows you and the environment you are working in is ideal.
2. Set a date for a meeting and book a space.
  - This will give you a timescale for your preparation. If you are looking to meet in a centre you may need to book a space quite a way in advance.
  - Put up a poster with your contact details on it somewhere near where you will be having the class.
3. Talk to an Order Member (again)
  - Keeping in touch with Order Members throughout this process brings confidence and clarity and also ensures your ideas are in line with the movement as a whole
4. Get in touch with young people:
  - Go to classes
  - Talk to teachers at the nearby centre about any young people they may know
  - Likewise, meet with the Mitra Convenor where you are
  - Make announcements or have your meeting put onto announcement sheets in your centre
5. Nourish yourself
  - Take the time to deepen your practice before starting.
  - Be inspired before trying to inspire others and try to stay in touch with conditions that keep you nourished and give you joy, inspiration and delight.
  - Know your strengths and work to them in the initial stages.
6. Be prepared
  - Turn up early for the class
  - Have some notes written
7. Do it!

The overwhelming response from coordinators so far has been one of encouragement. We feel that whatever you decide to do will be worthwhile and enjoyable. Young people really enjoy the groups and appreciate you making the effort. Those who attend will support you and respond positively to your efforts.

## TIPS FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT:

- **Regular classes** tend to help build things in the early stages. Even once a month at a regular timeslot (eg. First Sunday of the month) helps people around the centre get familiar with who and what you are doing. It makes it easier to point somebody in your direction and people are more likely to have an impulse to go if they know it is on and they don't have to commit to it.
- **Building a core group** of people helps to share the workload. Even 2-3 people can help with all the little jobs on the day or share the responsibility of leading a regular class. It is great for support too. These groups tend to form fairly organically but once you have some core team members you can look to meet more regularly as a team to discuss plans or give each other feedback. Try and build friendships first with this core group and the serious stuff will be a lot more manageable.
- **Plan a retreat.** This takes a lot more work but is very good at galvanising groups of people together. Talk to your local centre about how to go about this or contact us for more information.
- **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 the coordinator may find this type of thing very fulfilling and enjoyable and a good way to deepen friendships amongst organisers and coordinators.
- **Publicity tips:**
  - Word of mouth is hard to beat – a personal invitation is your best bet.
  - A notice board for young Sangha events with contact details. Keep it in a regular place so that new people can be directed towards it.
  - A central email address – eg. [youngsangha@yourcentre.org](mailto:youngsangha@yourcentre.org) which you can add people's emails to as you go along. You can create a mailing list for upcoming events.
  - Facebook pages – these are great for people who are searching around for Buddhist activities. Once they join they get reminders, you can post pictures and create archives which can be helpful.
  - Posters, flyers, etc..
- Some coordinators wanted to know tips on **getting people to commit** to events or groups. Some helpful ideas here are:
  - Build your friendships with people and put your friendship before any class or group. Friends are more likely to get to the truth of situations and less likely to let each other down.
  - Communicate in person or via telephone. Emails and texts, while easier to send, are harder to gauge people's genuine response. Building groups are an exercise in raising the level of communication between people.

- Be honest with yourself and others. Talk honestly about what you are prepared to commit and what your motivation is. Then ask others for what they think.
- **Avoid ‘teaching’ or talking at people.** Unless your peers ask you to teach them this approach might put people off. Encourage participation in the things that you do and explore topics and teachings together.
- **Allow time for socialising.** In any class or meeting plan time where nothing is happening except maybe eating or drinking tea. Social events on their own have proven to be equally as effective in growing your group.
- **Plug in to what is happening already.** There are a lot of young Sangha events happening, contact us to find out more.

## **YOUNG SANGHA GROUP IN LONDON – By Knut Wilmott**

I thought it would be most interesting and potentially helpful to simply talk about my experience of starting a young Sangha group at the London Buddhist Centre (LBC).

The origins for the starting a group at the LBC came from a movement-wide focus on the dwindling numbers of young people getting ordained compared with times gone by. It was felt that this needed to be addressed by the individual centres. In October 2009 there was a national retreat for young people, which a friend of mine attended. She came back enthusiastic to start a group and asked me if I was interested. At the same time the Chairman and Director at the LBC had also said they thought it was a good idea to start a group and something they were keen to support.

At our first meeting we had 5-6 people come along on a Sunday afternoon for meditation and discussion. I was a bit shocked to realise the atmosphere could be very different and enjoyable with even a simple meditation for 45 minutes. People seemed to want to do it and I felt encouraged meet more regularly. I felt like I could relate to them and although I led the meditation and discussion it felt like we were all quite equal. Together we created an atmosphere that was unique and interesting. It was not provided for us, we made it happen for ourselves.

Soon after this I decided to try and have a retreat for young people. It was slightly ambitious but the LBC’s retreat centre (Vajrasana) was available and I had the support of the Order Members at the centre. We tried again to meet regularly and although it was slow to get a core group of people together, the retreat we had consolidated things and out of this a core group of keen practitioners seemed to form.

The retreat itself was the beginning for friendships and connections that people genuinely wanted to maintain. There were lots of emails flying around after the retreat and people began meeting up socially and at the centre. A core group of people emerged wanting to make regular the events we put on and we decided to approach the group in 5 main ways:

- A regular practice session once a month.
- Regular retreats and practice days.
- Volunteer groups for projects and events in and around the LBC
- Outreach to the community actively spreading meditation and Buddhism.
- Finding ways to take practice further or deeper amongst those who wanted it.

As with all things to do with practicing Buddhism, I find myself constantly asking; why am I doing this? The young person group was no different and the answers trickled in for me over time. Nowadays I think about the friendship I have with people who come along to the events and the support I feel from them in keeping things going. Everybody seems to value and enjoy what we are doing so much that I feel happy to make an effort in whatever way I can to make events happen. We have cooked together for festivals, had days with special guest speakers, big sleep-over at my community, further retreats, and our regular class the first Friday of every month that just seems to grow and grow with every month we do it.

Recently we decided that it was too long between meetings and we were not getting enough chance to hang out with friends, so we put on an extra day a month on a Saturday morning which led into lunch to allow people time to chat and have some food together. It was really successful, the people that came did not want to leave at the end and we were still there at 3pm chatting and catching up.

Buddhist practice is difficult, a lifetime of effort and dedication awaits us if we want to make real spiritual progress and often it can feel like our goal is out of sight and/or there is a long way to go. To be able to share the ups and downs with friends my own age feels very reassuring and positive. After all the Buddha did say to Ananda:

*“Spiritual friendship is the whole of the spiritual life”*

Last year we discussed the five ethical precepts in turn with our regular class on the first Friday of the month. Each month we had really engaging discussions. Ethical issues are universal and even people that had never before set foot in a Buddhist centre until then had valid and really interesting things to say. For me, exploring ethics in this context helps me to reflect on my responsibilities to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. By contacting the three jewels my life has changed and I feel what I have learned is my responsibility to share. I have to do it in a way which allows people in to explore for them. Sometimes I have to reign in fanciful ideas and big plans so as to meet the people I am working with more truthfully and peacefully. My order member friends have helped me with this and in the LBC we have always worked closely with the order members to make sure what we are doing are true to the Triratna Buddhist community and true to Buddhism. In this way, and many others, working with a young Sangha group has strengthened and deepened my Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

#### **LINKS:**

- **Facebook group ‘Young People in the Triratna Buddhist Community’** [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=49821059114](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=49821059114)
- **Virya: Bulletin Board for young Triratna Buddhists** [www.virya.co.uk](http://www.virya.co.uk)
- **Buddhism Today** new web portal for young people's events happening in the Triratna Buddhist Community [www.buddhismtoday.co.uk](http://www.buddhismtoday.co.uk)